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Funding Legal Services

by FLYER STAFF

Most of us live in a cocoon of self-importance — or, to put that more gently, self-absorption. And the latter condition is getting to be downright universal, as economic conditions and changes in the world make the business of hanging in there ever more tenuous. Which is one among many reasons that the visit to Our Town this week of Carolyn Lamm, the newly installed president of the American Bar Association (A.B.A.), was so welcome. In several of the things she said and did while here, Lamm reminded us of the fact that none of us is that island that John Donne admonished us about. We are all part of the continent, and all bells toll for us. All the time.

One of Lamm's missions was to ring the bell on behalf of [Memphis Area Legal Services](#), an agency which exists for the sole purpose of providing access to the legal system — and to justice itself — for low-income citizens who otherwise would be unprotected and at the mercy of events or predators or exploiters.

It was rather disconcerting to hear Lamm remind us, in a luncheon speech on Tuesday to Memphis Rotarians, that the local agency processes some 6,500 cases annually and that these are but the tip of an iceberg. One of the issues that is before Congress these days is that of funding for Legal Services organizations nationwide, all of which are similarly — and increasingly — hard-pressed.

It was also a shock to be told that the Legal Services Corporation was created in 1974 with modest funding and that the act has not been re-authorized since 1977 (meaning, among other things, that its level of funding has not kept pace with the demand for its services or with cost-of-living increases).

Here, provided by Lamm, is a partial list of the problem areas which Legal Services provides pro bono help for: domestic violence; mortgage foreclosure, eviction, or homelessness; wrongful denial of health care, food stamps, unemployment compensation, and other forms of assistance; consumer fraud or predatory lending; and special challenges of children and the elderly.

As it happened, in April, the A.B.A. presented 9th District congressman Steve Cohen with its A.B.A. Day Award for his efforts to reauthorize the act endowing the Legal Services Corporation and to remedy racial and ethnic disparities. Cohen, who serves as chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law, issued his own public call for more funding for Legal Services this week.

We are happy to join in that call, just as we were pleased to be reminded by Lamm how urgent are the continuing needs of survival for so many of our fellow citizens and how imperative it is that we get off our private islands to make contact with them.

And we pay tribute to the staff of Memphis Area Legal Services and its volunteer attorneys, who have been answering the bell for these citizens whether the rest of us knew about it or not.

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