

Judge Lippman's Permanent Commission on Access to Justice



Bob Giuffra and Jessica Klein

Many low-income New Yorkers do not have representation when they appear in court for civil cases involving housing, credit and family law. This reality not only creates a less equitable justice system, but it also proves costly for the New York state economy, as taxpayer money is diverted to social services for unrepresented New Yorkers who cannot obtain federal benefits.

In an effort to address these unmet needs, New York State Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman created the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice in July. The commission will build upon and make permanent the work of the chief judge's Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services, which has already made significant strides in facilitating low-income New Yorkers' access to representation. The task force, which has met at Sullivan & Cromwell's offices since its establishment in 2010, has played a major part in increasing state spending on civil legal services.

These funding levels and non-monetary innovations developed by the task force—including a first-in-the-nation 50-hour pro bono service requirement for law graduates seeking New York bar admission, an award-winning overhaul of the Office of Court Administration's web site to make information about the court system and relevant forms more accessible, and a new initiative whereby pro bono attorneys working through the New York City Family Court are remotely linked by computer to litigants in rural parts of the state—have played an important role in reducing the number of unrepresented New Yorkers in civil matters from 2.3 million in 2010 to 1.8 million in 2014.

S&C has played a key role in the task force and will continue to provide indispensable support to the permanent commission. Partner Bob Giuffra has served as a member of the task force since its inception and chaired its simplification

subcommittee, which worked to streamline statewide forms and the court system web site, as well as to improve training for town and village court justices. Bob, with assistance from S&C associates Lara Loyd and Chiansan Ma, has also helped draft the task force's annual reports, which recommend ways in which the state can make its courts more accessible for low-income residents.

Jessica Klein, special counsel and head of S&C's pro bono practice, serves as counsel to the commission. "Through individual pro bono matters, S&C lawyers help low-income New Yorkers who are struggling to keep their housing, educate their children and meet the other essentials of life," Jessica told *The S&C Experience*. "Our work assisting these individual clients in need has informed our appreciation of the dramatic change in outcomes that is possible when low-income individuals have counsel. Through the work we do to support the task force, now the permanent commission, we have an incredible opportunity to assist at a macro level in providing greater access to counsel and to justice in New York state."

The permanent commission will ensure that the progress made by the task force, which has been reported in *The New York Times*, *New York Law Journal* and *The Wall Street Journal Law Blog*, will continue after Chief Judge Lippman leaves office. "S&C is proud to participate actively in the important work of first, the task force, and now, of the commission. Our work grows out of the Firm's long commitment to assisting the poor in obtaining representation in court," said Bob. ■