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JUSTICE NEWS

**Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the Legal Aid Society of
Cleveland Annual Luncheon**

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Thank you, Steve, for those kind words; for your outstanding service as United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio; and for your clear commitment, not only to advancing the work of our nation's Justice Department, but also to strengthening our entire justice system. It's a privilege to stand with you today – and to be back in the Buckeye State. And it's a pleasure to be among so many friends and partners as we discuss our common goal – and our shared responsibility – to help fulfill our nation's founding, and enduring, promise of equal opportunity for every citizen – and equal justice under law.

Making good on this promise is precisely what inspired the creation of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland more than a century ago. Today, as we celebrate so many decades of progress, and as we congratulate this year's award winners, I'd like to thank President Thompson and his outstanding team – including Executive Director Colleen Cotter – for all you've done to organize this important event; and for your ongoing efforts to ensure that quality legal representation is available, affordable, and accessible to every American.

On behalf of the entire Justice Department, I'm grateful for the chance to salute the remarkable contributions made by each of today's honorees, and by every member of your Board of Directors, who – over the course of their six-year terms – have worked tirelessly to extend our country's finest traditions of public service: by helping to safeguard essential rights, to restore dignity to those in need of assistance, and to promote justice for underserved and underprivileged communities throughout Northeast Ohio. I also want to thank the many leaders and advocates here today, including Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, of the Ohio Supreme Court, and Tim Young – Vice Chair, and soon-to-be-Chair, of the American Council of Chief Defenders, and current Director of the Office of the Ohio Public Defender – whose leadership and service have informed and strengthened the Justice Department's work to improve the delivery and availability of legal services here in this region, and far beyond.

Your efforts have helped to empower the most vulnerable among us – and brought hope and much-needed help to those struggling to afford civil legal representation. And your achievements give me great confidence in our ability to close the current “justice gap;” to build a more fair, more just, and more equitable society; and to expand the reach and impact of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

In so many different ways, this organization – along with its ever-expanding network of partners – has been instrumental in improving lives and bringing positive change to communities across this city. Whenever neighbors in need have come forward, seeking assistance and counsel, your dedicated staff attorneys and volunteers have stepped up to answer the call. Whether by offering valuable advice and representation for an individual facing a home foreclosure or a client facing a child custody hearing; by supporting victims of domestic violence or taking a stand against predatory and unfair lending practices, your volunteers and staff – with the generous support of the private bar – have made a life-changing – and sometimes, a life-saving – difference.

You've also proven that civil legal aid doesn't just open doors to our justice system – it provides a critical reinvestment in the community. Your work saves precious taxpayer dollars by protecting patients' health, increasing access to public benefits, keeping families together, reducing domestic violence, and offering indigent citizens a way out of poverty. And this economic benefit is more important than ever before, as so many of us – at every level of government, and across both the nonprofit and private sectors – have struggled to meet constantly growing demands with increasingly limited budgets.

However, despite significant financial challenges, the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has continued to make remarkable progress. Last year alone, your organization assisted more than 26,000 people in Northeast Ohio, in over 10,000 different cases. But, of course, for every client accepted for civil legal aid – many others must be turned away. In fact, a recent study showed that – in America today – nearly 80% of civil legal needs currently go unmet.

Many of us have witnessed this reality firsthand – and we’ve seen the heartbreaking stories behind the latest statistics. During my service as a judge on the D.C. Superior Court and, later, as United States Attorney for the District of Columbia, I came to understand that the fundamental integrity of our justice system, and its ability to deliver fair outcomes, will always depend on our willingness to ensure effective representation and resources on both sides of the courtroom. Throughout my career, I also learned a great deal about the challenges facing indigent criminal defendants. This is why – as Attorney General – I am determined to direct every available resource to address the growing legal aid crisis, to find and implement effective solutions, and to enlist new partners in the work of improving our ability to serve those in desperate need of access to quality representation and civil legal services.

Two years ago, I had the honor of joining with my colleagues to take bold, unprecedented action in addressing our indigent defense crisis. As many of you know, in 2010, the Justice Department took the historic step of launching a new component, known as the Access to Justice Initiative, to bring together stakeholders and experts at all levels to improve both the civil and criminal justice systems. Many of you are working closely with this office – and you’ve helped to enhance and extend our outreach efforts. And while I’m extremely proud of what the Access to Justice Initiative is helping to accomplish, this work is not relegated to a single office. So long as I have the privilege of serving as Attorney General, expanding access to legal services will be a Department-wide priority. This is a key focus area for every U.S. Attorney’s Office. And, over the last three years – through our Office of Justice Programs – we’ve helped to advance indigent defense efforts by supporting programs and partnerships that help educate, train, and equip lawyers to work in public defender offices and to mobilize members of the private bar to provide civil legal aid.

By engaging local leaders – as well as our federal, state, local, and tribal government counterparts – the Department’s Bureau of Justice Assistance also has provided direct support to programs aimed at improving the delivery of legal services for the poor; identifying best practices; increasing access to counsel at the earliest stages of legal proceedings; and expanding oversight of those who provide this assistance. Earlier this year, BJA awarded nearly \$1.3 million in grants for researching sustainable and evidence-based ways to address nationwide deficiencies. Just two days ago, the National Institute of Justice announced \$1.6 million in grants to examine policies and practices on indigent criminal defense. And, already, such investments – and the collaborative approaches they’re supporting – are paying dividends.

But with more than 50 million Americans eligible for federally-funded legal aid – and only a fraction of U.S. households with access to it – the harsh reality is that, in the vast majority of cases, civil legal aspects of problems involving personal finance, housing, employment, public benefits, the care and custody of minor children and dependent adults, and personal and neighborhood safety continue to go unaddressed.

That’s why each one of us must remain committed to this work. And I want to assure you that my colleagues and I recognize the importance of leading by example. Just as many of you have worked to grow *pro bono* initiatives at your firms and corporations, I am pleased to report that the Federal Government’s own Pro Bono Program has expanded its reach and encouraged all agency counterparts to adopt policies – and help navigate internal restrictions – to make it easier for our attorneys to answer the call to help those in need. Right here in Cleveland, your board member – and our Assistant U.S. Attorney, Mark Bennett – has emerged as an exemplary leader in developing opportunities for government attorneys to serve less fortunate citizens across Northeast Ohio. We’re proud of the example he has set – and are determined to continue and strengthen this important work.

Of course, I don’t expect that making the progress we need – or obtaining the results that the American people deserve – will be easy. History has proven that it won’t be. After all, nearly half a century has passed since the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright* – guaranteeing criminal defendants the right to be provided with legal counsel, even if they cannot afford an attorney. Thanks to scores of courageous and compassionate leaders, we’ve come a long way over the last half century – and are continuing to make tremendous progress in achieving this ideal. But, despite the promise of *Gideon*, the basic rights guaranteed almost five decades ago have yet to be fully realized. And there remains no guaranteed right to counsel in the civil context. Unfortunately, the day has not yet arrived when all of our citizens can access legal help without having to wait, to sacrifice, or to worry. This is unconscionable. And, to all Americans, it must be viewed as unacceptable.

This means that your work is more relevant – and more important – than ever. Yes, we have much to do. But today – as I look out over this crowd of passionate advocates and dedicated partners – I cannot help but feel confident in our ability to build on the momentum we’ve already established. Because of you, I am optimistic about the future that, together, we will help to create. And I am certain this future is not beyond our reach.

Once again, I’d like to thank today’s awardees for their extraordinary contributions, and all of your retiring board members for their remarkable service. I’m grateful for the chance to join you in celebrating all that the Legal Aid

Society of Cleveland has accomplished. And like all of you, I look forward to everything that we can – and surely will – achieve together in the days ahead.

Thank you.