## 3 ways to meet the “staggering” amount of unmet legal needs

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“If you were to fill Petco Park [the 42,445-seat baseball park in San Diego] to capacity with low-income people, there would be just two lawyers to serve them all.” That was the stark image summoned by Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of California Goodwin Liu, the keynote speaker at the [National Meeting of State Access to Justice Commission Chairs](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/initiatives/resource_center_for_access_to_justice/annual_meeting.html), held in conjunction with the ABA [Equal Justice Conference](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/probono_public_service/ejc/general.html) in San Diego in May.

Legal aid lawyers are estimated to provide just 1 percent of the total legal needs in the United States each year. “No wonder the majority of our low-income population don’t bother to seek a lawyer when they have a legal problem,” Liu said.

Lawyers chip in another 2 percent through an average 30 hours of pro bono work per year. “Even if we asked every lawyer in America to do 100 more hours of pro bono work a year, all of that additional work would be enough to secure only 30 minutes per problem per household in America,” Liu said.

Liu, the former chair of the California Access to Justice Commission, offered three suggestions for expanding access to justice and to move the needle on meeting legal needs. “And all three require us to grasp the true scale of unmet legal needs in this country,” he said. They are:

**Reevaluate the structure of how legal services are delivered.**The legal profession relies solely on lawyers to provide its services, but Liu suggested comparing that to how health care is delivered. That field features doctors, nurse practitioners, physician’s assistants, other types of nurses and a variety of technicians who meet patients’ needs. The health-care system, even with its challenges, Liu said, “allows the industry to triage needs to the lowest-cost provider and thereby expand access.”

Liu urged lowering the cost of legal services, and noted that it is already happening with Rocket Lawyer, LegalZoom, unbundled legal services and nonlawyer paraprofessionals such as the limited license legal technicians in Washington State.

“It is encouraging to see the range of emerging initiatives, and we need to keep innovating and evaluating what works,” he said.

**Use innovations to attract philanthropic support.** California’s Access to Justice Commission received funding from the Public Welfare Foundation and the Ford Foundation to expand some of its incubator programs. “Those grants, plus a contribution from our state bar, enabled us to seed programs in Los Angeles, Orange County, the Bay Area and the rural counties of Northern California,” Liu said. “The funding also enabled us to publish a practice guide, provide technical assistance and give visibility to these programs, which have now graduated scores of attorneys who have provided thousands of hours of legal assistance to low- or modest-income clients.”

“Private philanthropy can and must be part of the solution,” Liu said. He suggested drawing up a list of local, state and national foundations with related interests, and meeting with their program directors and presidents to see if there is a fit. “Foundations want to make a difference on important issues, and this one is important,” he said.

**Align access to justice goals with philanthropic efforts to fight poverty and improve economic security.** Liu noted that foundations like the Gates, Ford, Rockefeller, Kresge and others have recently announced initiatives to address issues of growing inequality and economic insecurity.

“I would argue that a necessary complement — indeed, a fundamental precondition of a fair economy — is a working legal system that safeguards the rights of ordinary people to their homes, their livelihoods and their incomes,” he said.

“If the most vulnerable among us are to have decent, stable lives, they must be protected against unlawful eviction, wage theft, abusive debt collection, illegal termination, unlawful deportation, toxic exposure and arbitrary denial of benefits,” Liu said. “They must have remedies when they are wronged. They must be able to enforce their most basic rights in accordance with the rule of law.”