

JUSTICE

Chief justice praises Legal Aid, pro bono attorneys

Essential services given to low-income people



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The chief justice of California came to Napa on Wednesday to praise the lawyers who represent the community's most vulnerable and needy population.

Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye attended the third annual recognition event for the dozens of pro bono attorneys and volunteers at Legal Aid of Napa Valley which represents more than 2,500 clients a year.

Speaking in front of 70 people in the Coombsville home of Bob and Anne Arns, she thanked those who work without a fee, saying that their efforts were "critical" to making the justice system accessible to all.

Cantil-Sakauye, who was appointed chief justice two years ago by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said, "My vision is the same vision as it was for the 27 chief justices before me. And it can only be one vision because we are the judicial branch. And that vision is access to justice — complete, fair access to justice."

"Legal Aid personifies access to justice in action," she said. "And so that is why it is a subject dear to my heart."

There is only one legal aid attorney for every 8,316 needy, impoverished Californians — or five legal aid attorneys to represent an AT&T ballpark's worth of poor people, the chief justice said. That is "a very sad commentary" on the justice system, she said.

She also called for efforts to restore funding to the judicial branch, whose budget has been cut by 36 percent over the past five years. Napa has felt the reduction in services, she said.

Rural Californians in counties like Fresno and San Bernardino have to drive further because institutions are closing, requiring the residents to drive to far-flung courthouse in county seats, although they often lack transportation, and many cannot leave families and jobs to go to court, she said.

The number of pro bono hours has been increasing in Napa. Diana Dorame, executive director of Legal Aid Napa Valley said 21 attorneys in 2008 donated 250 hours. Last year, 50 attorneys donated 3,000 hours.

Among those receiving awards Wednesday were San Francisco attorneys who successfully

represented a group of residents at the Chateau Calistoga Mobile Home Park who challenged their landlord over a \$100 rent increase. Other attorneys honored Wednesday represented clients on complex family law cases and bankruptcy.

“She gave a very dynamic speech that energized all of us. And you see why she is the chief. She energizes people and makes us all feel proud about Napa Valley Legal Aid,” said Bob Arns, an attorney who practices in San Francisco.

This was the chief justice’s second visit to talk to a group of Napa lawyers since last summer, when she addressed the Napa County Bar Association.

This story has been modified since the original posting.