



American Bar Association

Thurgood Marshall Legal Educational Opportunity Program

The mission of the American Bar Association is to serve the public and the profession by promoting justice and respect for the law. The public trust in the decisions and results the justice system renders requires confidence that the system is fair. However, an ABA study in 2000 confirmed that as many as half of those polled perceived that they were treated differently based on factors such as the color of their skin. The American Bar Association is also concerned that people from disadvantaged communities and circumstances face enormous obstacles to pursuing a law degree that consequently leave their communities underserved.

The ABA believes that these barriers can be overcome through critically important services such as pre-law recruitment, counseling, training and financial assistance. The congressional Thurgood Marshall Legal Educational Opportunity Program (Marshall Program), originally authorized in 1998 and set to expire this year, is vital to the continued delivery of these services, especially need-based financial assistance.

The ABA urges Congress to reauthorize the Thurgood Marshall Legal Educational Opportunity Program at \$4 million funding per year for 2007 and the succeeding five years; and urges members of Congress to cosponsor language reauthorizing the program such as in H.R. 609, because:

- **The high cost of law school tuition is an insurmountable barrier for many prospective students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.** The average cost of a legal education is approximately \$100,000, requiring 86% of all students to seek various forms of financial aid. Despite the desire to make a laudable contribution to society as lawyers, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are often unable to overcome comparatively modest gaps between available assistance and tuition. The Marshall Program provides stipends of up to \$10,000 based on need to committed program fellows.
- **Public confidence in the justice system is enhanced when the faces of its officers reflect the growing diversity of the people it serves.** Currently, racial and ethnic minorities comprise more than 30% of the population, but lawyers of color represent less than 10% of the profession with no one race or ethnicity constituting more than 4%. Even so, some groups such as Native Americans have particularly critical need for such legal services, yet their communities' often remote, rural locations are an obstacle to receiving them. The ABA shares in this goal of diversity through its own privately funded Legal Education Opportunity Fund.
- **The Marshall Program is a good investment of taxpayer dollars.** In addition to the immediate resources the Marshall program makes available, it benefits from the experience of its administering organization, the Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO). CLEO is a project of the ABA Fund for Justice and Education that has assisted more than 7,000 graduates, including distinguished alumni in Congress, the bench, bar and academia.
- **The Marshall program is in the process of outreach to assist similar state and regional efforts to best address the specific needs in particular states and communities.** As an appropriate expansion of the mission of CLEO and the Marshall Program, efforts are now underway in several states including Kentucky and Georgia and potentially others, to support existing CLEO-like programs and foster new ones to help those with the greatest understanding of regional needs assist their own communities.