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Bold Plans for New York Courts

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD FEB. 20, 2015

The “justice gap” in New York State, which leaves many low-income people without the legal help they need to deal with evictions, foreclosures and other serious legal problems, must be narrowed. That is a central message of the state’s chief judge, Jonathan Lippman, who has come up with innovative ideas and programs for making the court system more equitable and accessible.

In his annual address on Tuesday, which received wide attention for its ideas about overhauling the way grand juries handle police-related killings, Judge Lippman addressed a range of issues. He said he was seeking a resolution from the State Legislature endorsing the principle that poor litigants in life-altering civil cases are entitled to effective legal representation, known as “civil Gideon.”

He will also submit legislation to authorize greater use of trained non-lawyers, called court “navigators,” to assist unrepresented litigants in housing, consumer debt and other legal matters. This builds on pilot projects in Brooklyn and the Bronx that have shown great promise.

Judge Lippman pointedly noted that parts of the state still lag in fulfilling the constitutional responsibility to provide quality legal representation for indigent individuals accused of crimes. He called on the Legislature to allocate \$28 million in the coming fiscal year to reduce public defender caseloads and make other improvements that the state agreed to last year as part of a legal settlement that technically applied to just five of the state’s 62 counties.

Judge Lippman is also enlarging his new Pro Bono Scholars Program, which allows law students to take the bar exam early in exchange for devoting their last semester to full-time pro bono work. New fellowships will allow some of these students to work at legal services offices for two years after graduation.

Adding a community court in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, one of the

city's most violent neighborhoods, is another welcome initiative. These courts emphasize drug treatment, job training, community service and other nonprison options for low-level criminal offenders, helping them to get their lives back on track while building community trust in the justice system.

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