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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Iowa Legal Aid Organizations Merge *Funding Campaign Launched*

(Des Moines) At a news conference featuring former Governor Robert Ray and Attorney General Tom Miller, it was announced that legal services programs serving Iowa's most vulnerable populations have merged into a single organization. The Legal Services Corporation of Iowa, originally formed in 1977, and the Legal Aid Society of Polk County, with more than 50 years of experience in providing low-income Iowans legal advice and representation, became Iowa Legal Aid on January 1st.

"Legal aid provides a critical service to people who are truly in need – women and children, veterans, the elderly and low-income individuals. We're excited about the new Iowa Legal Aid, which builds on two long and proud legacies of providing access to justice for all Iowans," said Kevin Collins of Cedar Rapids, president-elect of the Iowa State Bar Association.

In 2003, Iowa Legal Aid expects to handle 20,000 cases, helping a projected 50,000 women, senior citizens, veterans and other low-income Iowans in every corner of the state with issues such as disability benefits, family law, housing rulings and financial issues. Many Iowa Legal Aid clients are women with nowhere else to turn, needing help that ranges from obtaining a restraining order against an abusive partner to appealing a ruling denying Social Security or other benefits. Half of the individuals helped by Iowa Legal Aid have children, and more than a third are victims of domestic abuse.

Iowa Legal Aid also plays a key role in keeping the state's legal system functioning well. "Administering justice under the law equally to all people depends in part upon the efficiency of court procedures, which are facilitated when those who appear before us are adequately represented. The services provided by Iowa legal Aid help ensure fairness in the resolution of disputes for those who would otherwise be without counsel," remarked Iowa Supreme Court Chief Justice Louis Lavorato.

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The merger is part of nationwide movement to consolidate states' legal aid. The federal Legal Services Corporation, which provides funding for legal aid across the country, has asked groups to merge in order to provide more effective, efficient services. Legal aid organizations in the majority of states have merged in the past five years.

Although planning began for Iowa Legal Aid began almost two years ago, the merger occurs at a time when legal aid organizations throughout the Midwest are facing their biggest funding challenge since the early 1980s, when federal cutbacks left many legal aid programs with substantial deficits. Changes in federal funding formulas, state budget shortfalls and changes in the Interest on Lawyer Trust Account program are creating a budget crisis throughout the Midwest, including in Iowa, where legal services budgets may be cut as much as 30 percent. In order to continue service at existing levels, Iowa Legal Aid has initiated the Campaign for Iowa Legal Aid seeking contributions from lawyers, corporations, philanthropic organizations and other key organizations.

"We have a new organization and a new plan for legal aid in Iowa," said Dennis Groenenboom, Iowa Legal Aid's executive director. "Iowa Legal Aid will offer a leaner, more cost-efficient approach to delivering services, and the Campaign for Iowa Legal Aid is a new model to ensure all Iowans have access to justice. By bringing our case to the people and institutions of Iowa, we plan to create an entrepreneurial organization with a broad level of support."

Iowa Legal Aid provides services to low-income people in all 99 Iowa counties. Services are provided from offices located in Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Iowa City, Mason City, Ottumwa, Sioux City and Waterloo. Iowa Legal Aid will be governed by an 18-member Board of Directors composed of attorneys and client-eligible individuals, 12 of whom previously served on the boards of the two legal aid entities.