

## Volunteer Lawyers Project Receives \$200,000 Grant

The Nebraska Commission on Public Advocacy Legal Aid and Services Fund awarded the Nebraska State Bar Association's Charitable Funds, Inc. (CFI) \$200,000 for the Volunteer Lawyers Project to help support the program's operations in 2006.

The Volunteer Lawyers Project uses the grant to fund general case placement, the VLP-SO clinics, the immigrant detention project and the domestic violence project.

VLP appreciates the continued substantial support of the Nebraska Commission on Public Advocacy, supporting the work of volunteer attorneys and helping to remove barriers to achieving access to justice for low-income Nebraskans.

## 2006: The Year of the Juror

On Friday January 6, 2006 Governor Heineman, signed a joint proclamation with Nebraska Supreme Court Justice John Hendry and Nebraska State Bar Association President William Ditttrick, declaring **2006 The Year of the Juror**. The proclamation recognizes the important contribution that jurors provide to the justice system and marks the launching of a statewide campaign in 2006 to educate and encourage jury service among Nebraskans.

While it is hoped that the campaign will increase juror participation among all Nebraskans, the campaign targets the more diverse counties of Hall, Madison, Scotts Bluff, Dawson, Lancaster and Douglas. As Chief Justice Hendry explains, "The jury system is a fundamental cornerstone of the justice system. The premise that a defendant will receive a trial by a representative group of his or her peers is essential to maintain confidence in the court system." When considering why the perception of a fair process is important, Justice John Gerrard of the Nebraska Supreme Courts elaborates, "Attitudes toward the courts can affect the way individuals perceive their role in the justice system. When people believe that the justice system is fair it increases their willingness to comply with laws, report crimes, file suits, and so on."

Data gathered by Nebraska's Minority and Justice Task Force in 2001 suggested that our juries are not always representative of their communities. Testimony collected through statewide public hearings and discussions with district court clerks, jury commissioners and minority community leaders suggests that minority underrepresentation on juries is in part due to a general distrust and unfamiliarity with the justice system, resulting in a failure to respond to jury summonses by many. For many new Americans, receiving a letter from the court often creates feelings of suspicion or fear, especially if the summons is served by local law enforcement.

In response, the MJIC partnered with district court clerks, jury commissioners, and representatives from the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, the Nebraska Mexican American Commission, the Urban League of Nebraska and the Nebraska Racial Justice Initiative in developing a three-pronged campaign to promote jury service, consisting of meetings with minority community organizations, dissemination of written materials regarding the jury process, and a targeted radio campaign.



*It's official! From left to right, Justice John Gerrard of the Nebraska Supreme Court; Cecilia Huerta, Executive Director of Nebraska Mexican American Commission; Chief Justice John Hendry; Governor Dave Heineman; Liz Neeley, Executive Director of the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee; and NSBA President, William Ditttrick.*

The campaign will visit select counties across the state, educating the public about the jury process and broadcasting the message, "It Isn't Fair If You Aren't There." The campaign is funded through a grant to Charitable Funds Inc. from Woods Charitable Fund and several individual contributors.

Outcomes measurement: The MJIC will collect baseline data on the racial composition of Nebraska's jury pools, and the current "non-response" rates counties have in regards to jury summonses. Following the educational campaign the MJIC will be able to track any significant impacts the project has on the "non-response" rate and to what extent the campaign has increased the participation of racial and ethnic minorities on jury pools. Data will also be collected regarding the reasons why individuals are hesitant to serve on juries and the results of this evaluation will be used to inform and make policy recommendations to the Administrative Office of the Courts about adopting long-term policies to increase juror participation and encourage minority representation on juries. 