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Coalition wants state to create, fund legal aid for poor

By Dawson Bell

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This report has been corrected since its initial publication. The amount for additional spending needed to provide legal assistance for indigent defendants was wrong. The correct amount is \$40 million.*

LANSING – A broad coalition of civil rights, legal and religious groups called on Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Michigan Legislature today to create and fund a statewide system of legal assistance for indigent defendants, calling current conditions deplorably inadequate.

Speaking at a news conference at the state Capitol, representatives of the Campaign for Justice said as much as \$40 million a year in additional spending would be needed to make Michigan's provision of lawyers for poor criminals barely adequate. Michigan counties now spend about \$80 million a year on indigent defense, said campaign director Laura Sager.

But Sager said the group, which includes the ACLU, the Michigan Catholic Conference and a host of attorney and judicial associations, is not currently seeking a specific amount of new funding or promoting a single proposal, deferring to the Legislature and the governor to lead the effort. Despite the ailing economy, action should be taken this year, she said.

"Now that we have an assembled army...I'm confident we will prevail," Sager said

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