If We Don’t Get Civil Gideon: Trying to Make the Best of the Civil-Justice Market

Thomas D. Rowe Jr.*
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Abstract

This article considers what market-oriented or market-regulation approaches might be most practical and helpful in trying to satisfy unmet civil legal-service needs and how much it appears that such approaches may be able to succeed in doing so.

KEYWORDS: civil litigation, access to justice, tort
Several years ago I served as board president of the Legal Services Corporation affiliate for Durham and some neighboring North Carolina counties. Before going to a national conference of legal-services providers for the indigent, I noticed on the program a panel about market approaches; out of interests both academic and practical, I signed up. But for reasons unknown to me that was the only panel, or one of very few, that got scrubbed.

During my service it became clear to me how unlikely it is, I would guess even with a more liberal President and Congress, that leading sources of civil legal services for those unable to afford them—such as public subsidy, pro bono, and law-school clinics—will ever fill more than a modest or moderate fraction of the perceived needs.1 Much of my academic work has treated various aspects of civil-justice reform, often dealing with attorney-fee shifting2 and more broadly with civil-litigation incentives.3 This symposium lets me try, by drawing on my experiences with legal services and prior scholarly work, to broaden my focus and consider what market-

1. See, e.g., LEGAL SERVS. CORP., DOCUMENTING THE JUSTICE GAP IN AMERICA: THE CURRENT UNMET CIVIL LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AMERICANS 4 (2007), available at http://www.lsc.gov/justicegap.pdf (“Only a very small percentage of the legal problems experienced by low-income people (one in five or less) are addressed with the assistance of either a private attorney (pro bono or paid) or a legal aid lawyer.”); Deborah L. Rhode, Access to Justice: Connecting Principles to Practice, 17 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 369, 371 (2004) (“[A]bout four-fifths of the civil legal needs of low income individuals, and two- to three-fifths of the needs of middle-income individuals, remain unmet.”).

2. See, e.g., Thomas D. Rowe, Jr., The Legal Theory of Attorney Fee Shifting: A Critical Overview, 1982 DUKE L.J. 651; Thomas D. Rowe, Jr., Predicting the Effects of Attorney Fee Shifting, 47 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 139 (Winter 1984).

oriented or market-regulation approaches might be most practical and help-
ful in trying to satisfy unmet civil legal-service needs—and to think about
how much it appears that such approaches may be able to succeed in doing
so. To the extent that they likely cannot, that raises the urgency of pur-
suing the likes of civil-Gideon efforts and public-subsidy increases.

I come from this angle not because of an ideological commitment to
market approaches, nor am I suggesting unmixed reliance on the market.
Indeed, I’d favor more public funding for, and pro bono provision of, civil
legal services for the needy. Rather, I start from the premise, accepted
with some reluctance, that we are not likely to come close to filling the
gaps, much less adopt a quite different approach for civil legal services—
say, a broad civil version of Gideon v. Wainwright—like the sometimes-
advocated single payer for medical care that would radically alter the cal-
culus. We therefore face a situation with characteristics like those that the
Nobel-winning economist Kenneth Arrow identified several decades ago as
distinguishing medical care from many other markets, which seem to apply
as well to the civil-legal-services sector: service demand that is (some-

4. Professor Herbert M. Kritzer, in an important article, reports findings that in several
nations the correlation between income and retaining a lawyer appears relatively low, while
the nature of a dispute is a much more important determinant. Herbert M. Kritzer, To Law-
yer or Not to Lawyer: Is That the Question?, 5 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. 875, 900 (2008).
That point hardly eliminates the significance of trying to structure markets for civil legal
services so as to eliminate or reduce unwarranted barriers to access.

5. See generally Howard H. Dana, Jr., Introduction: ABA 2006 Resolution on Civil
Right to Counsel, 15 TEMP. POL. & CIV. RTS. L. REV. 501 (2006). The American Bar Asso-
ciation House of Delegates in 2006 unanimously approved a report calling upon
federal, state, and territorial governments to provide legal counsel as a matter of
right at public expense to low income persons in those categories of adversarial
proceedings where basic human needs are at stake, such as those involving shelter,
sustenance, safety, health or child custody, as determined by each jurisdiction.


6. Those like me who favor more public funding and pro bono must acknowledge the
objection that such approaches can deprive recipients of the legal services of the choice
whether to have those services, versus money they can spend on those legal services or oth-
erwise as they prefer. See, e.g., Charles Silver & Frank B. Cross, What’s Not to Like About
Being a Lawyer?, 109 YALE L.J. 1443, 1481-93 (2000) (reviewing ARTHUR L. LIMAN, LAW-
YER: A LIFE OF COUNSEL & CONTROVERSY (1998) (discussing the economics of pro bono
civil legal services)). But the kind of change that would follow from this criticism would
require rethinking of many other benefit schemes; Medicaid recipients, for example, cannot
choose dollars over medical services.

7. 372 U.S. 335 (1963) (holding indigent defendant in state criminal prosecution con-
stitutionally entitled to appointed counsel). One significant possibility on the national level
may now be the relaxation of Congressional restrictions on Legal Services Corporation affil-
iates, barring them from handling class actions or claims for which attorneys’ fees can be
awarded. For discussion and criticism of the restrictions, see Rhode, supra note 1, at 388-
91; see generally Henry Rose, Class Actions and the Poor, 6 PIERCE L. REV. 55 (2007).
times) irregular and unpredictable; service supply influenced not just by
buyers’ wishes but by suppliers’ professional judgment of clients’ needs,
along with frequent informational asymmetry between provider and client
about needs for, and likely consequences of, legal services; and limits, from
educational and licensing requirements, on market entry of providers. 8

This background sets the stage for an inquiry into ways of trying to
make the best of the civil-justice market to move toward optimal access to
civil justice for all. “Optimal,” of course, is a key modifier and is not the
same as “maximum,” for other values and factors including sheer costs in a
setting of finite-resource tradeoffs call for attention. Also significant is the
need for screening of weak claims and defenses: whatever the emphases of
access proponents and litigation-explosion alarmists, both weak nuisance
claims that are brought for their settlement value and their perhaps too-
often-overlooked flip side—obdurate defense against meritorious claims—
strike me as legitimate concerns. So does the need to try to protect con-
sumers of legal services from exploitation and incompetence. We also
cannot overlook the factors of concerns for professionalism and the abiding
existence of a considerable degree of self-regulation by the bar.

Three final preliminary points are the limits on how much new ground I
can break; the importance of disaggregating the types of unmet needs for
civil legal services; and the distinction between litigation and transactional
needs. First, the market-oriented approaches that hold some promise have
received considerable discussion in existing literature, on which I draw
without purporting to add much. The main function of this essay can thus
be bringing together in one place, and highlighting, the leading possibili-
ties. Second, as to disaggregating types of unmet needs: the moderate-
sized damage claim that is not worth a lawyer pursuing for a contingent
percentage fee is one thing, and may respond to a fee-shifting measure that
would give little or no help, say, to an indigent parent not near going to
court yet but seeking school-accommodation measures or medicine for a
learning-disabled or asthmatic child, or to someone in early stages of a
landlord-tenant dispute over housing conditions. Such distinctions can
clarify whether various kinds of unmet legal needs seem more or less
amenable to market-oriented approaches—and to the extent that they may
not be, the possible need to push for greater public funding.

Third, as for the litigation-transactional difference, of course the focus of
this symposium is on access to legal representation in civil litigation. Still,
it seems useful to address both aspects. Measures that may help with both,

or primarily on the transactional side, are likely to be efficiency improvements that lower the cost of legal services, such as nonlawyer representation, “unbundled” legal services that involve less than full lawyer participation and partial self-representation, and Web-based legal information or computerized expert systems. For litigation—in civil court cases and in administrative proceedings—fee-shifting policy changes might offer considerable help, particularly but not exclusively on the plaintiffs’ side. The obstacles to the market-oriented changes needed to assure greater access may be mainly political (as they are with greater public funding), in that resistance to the likes of primarily one-way pro-prevailing-plaintiff fee shifting would probably be substantial. Further, market-oriented approaches requiring legislation would likely require changes primarily in state law, meaning that a single federal law could not do the trick even if Congress were favorably inclined.

One starting point, for both transactional matters and some litigation, is considering just how restrictive the prohibitions on unauthorized practice of law should be. It would be unrealistic to advocate abolishing all professional licensing for lawyers, along with any restrictions on provision of legal services by nonlawyers, and relying purely on credentialing and consumer choice. Limits on prospective clients’ information about legal-service providers are a genuine concern and could leave them too exposed to exploitation and poor service. But provisions that have the effect of creating a somewhat-protected monopoly on providing a range of legal services need to be justified by true concern to protect clients from unqualified providers, rather than shielding lawyers from qualified nonlawyer competition. Although competitive practices can be strong within the legal profession, and have increased in recent decades with such developments as reduced restrictions on attorney advertising,10 the American legal profession enjoys greater protection from nonlawyer competition than in some other nations such as England.11

9. For those with substantial damage claims, of course, the well-established contingent percentage fee promotes access to justice without need to adopt fee-shifting rules. See, e.g., Lawrence M. Friedman, Access to Justice: Some Historical Comments, 37 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 3, 9 (2010). But for those with smaller claims or who seek injunctive or declaratory relief, the contingent fee is no help.


Thus, a significant first area for consideration is relaxation of unauthorized-practice restrictions, through such measures as specialized representation by lay advocates before administrative tribunals\(^\text{12}\) and use of trained paralegals with limited lawyer supervision (much as the medical sector does a considerable amount of service-providing through physicians’ assistants and nurse practitioners).\(^\text{13}\) Others, particularly Professors Kritzer and Rhode, have developed proposals including provision for various forms of regulation, which I should not repeat.\(^\text{14}\) Here, of course, the resistance of the bar might be a significant factor\(^\text{15}\)—as might the threat of antitrust enforcement if restrictions were perceived to be too anti-competitive.\(^\text{16}\) But the obstacles to reform do not include lack of knowledge or ideas on what to do; we know of positive experience elsewhere and have the spadework done on what seem to be workable proposals.

Relaxing restrictions on unauthorized practice could make available less expensive providers of legal services for both litigation and transactional
services. So could the “unbundling” of legal services so that parties can pay for limited legal assistance when proceeding more or less pro se. But such an approach could call for great care—especially in litigation—to handle issues such as direct contact between a party with limited representation and counsel for a represented party. Prepaid legal insurance plans, sometimes provided by unions or as an employee benefit, may both reduce potential clients’ reluctance to consult a lawyer and sometimes provide limited service in the manner of unbundled approaches. Further, artificial intelligence using expert systems may permit computer evaluation and advice, helping contain problems with the increasing amount of pro se representation and holding out the promise of improving access by “massively reducing legal costs.”

The principal measures discussed thus far would involve a lowering of regulatory barriers to market competition (such as unauthorized-practice reform) or relying on market developments (as with efficiencies from provisions of computerized expert systems). Various other measures, involving legal tweaks influencing market actors’ incentives, should help specifi-


For a more radical proposal, see Benjamin H. Barton, Against Civil Gideon (and for Pro Se Court Reform) (Feb. 25, 2010), available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1540763 (arguing for pro se court reform—change and simplification of procedures in specialized courts, such as ones handling child-support/child-custody, landlord-tenant, and small-claims cases, that have pro se matters as a large part of their dockets—as more promising approach than civil Gideon to dealing with legal problems of the poor).


19. See, e.g., A.B.A. COMM’N ON NONLAWYER PRACTICE, supra note 15, at 88-91 (discussing possible benefits of and issues with prepaid legal insurance). For further discussion of group legal services, see Rhode, supra note 1, at 417-18.

cally on the litigation side, particularly for plaintiffs. To begin with approaches affecting liability for attorneys’ fees, I have long expressed skepticism about broad loser-pays fee-shifting, at least outside business litigation involving more or less well-matched adversaries. While the loser-pays approach could encourage strong small claims (and discourage weak ones), the effective strict-liability threat of down-side exposure would be highly likely to deter reasonable but not sure-winner claims of plaintiffs with modest means.

For tort litigation, I have developed proposals for primarily one-way pro-prevailing-plaintiff fee shifting, coupled with a formal offer-of-settlement provision letting defendants try to stop the clock on plaintiffs’ fee entitlement and sanctions (which could be on either lawyer or client) for bringing or continuing baseless claims. Such an approach should have the corrective-justice benefit of providing fuller compensation to prevailing plaintiffs, a goal not fully served when a contingent percentage fee comes out of the plaintiff’s recovery. It ought as well to provide incentives for lawyers to take meritorious cases, while affording fairness and filtering for defendants by its offer and sanction provisions. We more or less have this approach already in the civil-rights area, and my impression is that it works fairly well. Further, of course, it can help with claims for injunctive and declaratory relief as well as, or even more so than, with those for damages.

A more limited measure that is not widely used but is on the books in North Carolina is a fee-shifting entitlement for prevailing plaintiffs’ counsel in cases recovering an amount smaller than a statutorily specified sum.
With such claims not worth pursuing on a contingent-fee basis, some incentive is needed if attorney—or, for that matter, qualified nonlawyer—involvement is regarded as desirable. The sum should probably be a good deal higher than North Carolina’s current $10,000, for even significantly larger claims can be uneconomical to pursue without a fee shift. And it seems important that fee recoveries be allowed to approximate or even exceed the recovery, at least in cases of unjustifiably strong defense resistance, lest the fee incentive fall short of what would make the claims worth pursuing. It is, finally, not inconceivable to render some help to access by providing for pro-prevailing-defendant fee shifting. For the perhaps somewhat uncommon defendant who prevails in a collection or eviction proceeding, for example, allowing a reasonable fee award might enable those with strong defenses to obtain counsel rather than proceed pro se or default. A 1984 survey of state fee-shifting statutes found 8.4% of 1,974 statutes unearthed to award fees to prevailing defendants, although it did not give examples.\(^{26}\)

Other litigation-side proposals have been somewhat more theoretical so far. There has been considerable academic discussion of the sale of single claims\(^ {27}\) or auctions for large numbers of small claims.\(^ {28}\) This idea is based somewhat on the theory that if lawyers can in effect buy a third or 40% of a claim or group of claims with a contingent percentage fee, should someone—lawyer or otherwise—be able to buy 100% of a group of related claims and pursue them on a consolidated basis more or less as if an assignee? Prior experience with litigation of individual and small groups of claims would be necessary to establish a basis for bidding. Even defendants might be allowed to bid, with the claims regarded as settled and the proceeds distributed to the claimants if the defendants bid highest. There has also been discussion, mainly in Great Britain, of a contingency legal aid fund, which might be initially supported by a government stake but then expected to pay its own way by taking percentages of recoveries in cases it

\(^{26}\) See Note, State Attorney Fee Shifting Statutes: Are We Quietly Repealing the American Rule?, 47 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 321, 330 (Winter 1984).


supported. In addition, Ontario and Quebec have funds to support class actions, with the Quebec fund having been quite active.

On the transactional side, the main market-oriented hope appears to be with improvements to efficiency and concomitant cost reductions, several forms of which were discussed above in the context of measures that could help with both litigation and transactional matters. Relaxation of unauthorized-practice rules to let qualified nonlawyers, including paralegals with limited lawyer involvement, aid clients by providing legal services in non-litigation situations, is worth further exploration, as may be some expanded use of prepaid legal services.

Having surveyed the possibilities, I find myself not terribly optimistic about the extent to which market measures of the sort discussed here can adequately meet the legal needs of the poor and those of modest means. Particularly with transactional needs, people generally need some money to take advantage of even low-cost services. It may also be a stretch to expect that awards in fee-shifting regimes, if they could be enacted, would be adequate in comparison to market rates paid by clients with resources. (Maybe I better understand now why that panel was called off, although I still think that the effort of working through the possibilities is worthwhile.)

Improvements do seem possible, especially when it comes to making pursuit of smaller claims viable through fee-shifting measures (notwithstanding the political obstacles to their enactment), and improved efficiency through such measures as relaxation of unauthorized-practice restrictions and allowing unbundled delivery of legal services. I fear, however, that what Professor John Leubsdorf wrote many years ago remains true: “Although market reforms might reduce the cost of legal services and enable indigents with valuable claims to finance legal proceedings by borrowing against their claims, many poor people with perceived legal needs

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31. See supra text accompanying notes 13-14 (discussing possible relaxation of rules on unauthorized practice of law).


33. See PARKER, supra note 13, at 41 (regarding it as “naive” to expect market approaches to let a majority afford needed legal services, but noting that they can help those with some resources to spend on legal services and when litigation can provide a source for fees).
would remain without lawyers.”\textsuperscript{34} That likelihood in turn brings us back to the centrality of increased funding for legal services, whether by expanded appropriations or some form of civil \textit{Gideon}, as a major element in narrowing the gaps now existing for access to civil justice.