

Remarks Prepared for Delivery

**John G. Levi, Chairman
Legal Services Corporation**

**Mikva Challenge Corporate Citizenship Award
Chicago, Illinois
April 21, 2011**

Thank you so much Jonathan. If I ever need to be introduced in the future, I'll be sure to have them call you.

I am tremendously honored to receive this award, and particularly moved to be given an award in the name of two extraordinary citizens of our city and country—Abner and Zoe Mikva. And to be given it by such a special organization, the Mikva Challenge.

Congratulations to our distinguished former Governor Jim Edgar, to the remarkable Mayor Cory Booker, and to the Curie Metropolitan High School of Chicago.

My profound thanks to all who have made these Mikva Challenge awards and this ceremony possible tonight.

I would not be here without my wonderful wife Jill, our sons, Ben and Danny, our daughter Sarah, and our future daughter-in-law, Millie—because, as they will be happy to tell you, and as many of you already know, it takes a village to keep me up and running.

I knew from my childhood that Abner Mikva was one of my father's very favorite law students. Ab was editor-in-chief of the University of Chicago law review, and my dad told me throughout his life that Abner Mikva was one of his most outstanding students.

Because of the neighborhood I grew up in, Abner Mikva was among the very first people whose names I remember being attached to a public role, since he was our state representative from Hyde Park at that time in the Illinois House. When my lab school class went to Springfield for its state capital tour—who welcomed us on our tour and showed us around the Capitol? None other than Ab Mikva. And then around election time as a young kid I proudly wore a Mikva button.

Zoe Mikva was just as involved in the life of our Hyde Park community, working to make sure it was desegregated and that children of all backgrounds had the same educational opportunities.

To receive an award bearing their names is so very emotional for me.

I am a lucky guy. I was blessed to be born in a family that has had its direct roots in our city for over 150 years. Each of those generations gave me such a clear demonstration of their own commitment to the welfare of our city and community.

And I was fortunate to be hired out of law school by Sidley Austin, where I had example after example—including colleagues here tonight—who have made their own significant commitments of time and support to a wide array of charitable organizations throughout the country.

Not long after I moved back to Chicago in the 1970s to begin my career, I received a call from Natalie Heineman, a lifelong family friend. She knew of my interest in becoming involved in the community, and called to ask me to join her, which I did, on the board of the Chicago Child Care Society, a Hyde Park-based children's care agency. Natalie said that the Society had a significant endowment, and assured me that there would be no need for fundraising. Well, a few years later, I found myself running the first Child Care benefit, then launching its annual fund drive—"no fundraising" didn't last very long. And, as many of you in this room may want to know, having been on the receiving end of my calls, that is where I got my fundraising start.

And my involvement with, and growing passion for, the issues that I first learned about at Child Care led me to service on the boards of a number of other wonderful organizations, as I focused my energies on the justice system, education and child welfare.

All of these experiences, together with the amazing foresight of recruiting to our firm a young law student named Barack Obama, brought me to the Chairmanship of the Legal Services Corporation, an 11-person Board that I was confirmed to serve on a little over a year ago with, among others, Laurie Mikva, here with us tonight, and Newt and Jo Minow's daughter, Martha.

And these days, when you put a mike in front of me, especially with a captive audience, I feel compelled to talk about the challenge of equal access to justice and the crisis in representation confronting our nation.

The Legal Services Corporation is the single largest funder of civil legal aid in the country. It distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants to 136 nonprofit legal aid programs to provide civil legal services to low-income Americans in every state.

These LSC offices are swamped with requests for assistance, and unfortunately have to turn away 50-to-80 percent of those seeking help because of inadequate resources. State and local courts—especially housing and family courts—are overwhelmed with low-income unrepresented individuals.

And our poverty population is growing. LSC estimates that more than 63 million Americans now qualify for civil legal assistance, living at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline. Of them, 22 million are children.

These legal aid programs are actually great public-private partnerships, obtaining on the average more than half of their support from other funders, together with the significant donations of time from private practitioners. These programs have been at the forefront of using technology to develop self-help forms and online information—essential to the orderly functioning of civil courts throughout the nation. Their lawyers help women and children escape abusive

relationships, help families avert foreclosure, protect the elderly from consumer scams, and reach out to veterans struggling to get the benefits and treatment that we owe them for their sacrifices on behalf of the nation. These programs also put a priority on helping young people—from coping with bullies in schools to ensuring grandparents have guardianships to permit lifesaving medical care for their grandchildren.

But these legal aid programs are stretched thin. State and local funding has declined, and whether federal support will increase remains an open question.

We simply cannot let our civil justice system collapse. Our nation has promised equal justice for all.

Together we must do a better job of educating our fellow countrymen as to the existence of this crisis and the implications for our country if it is not properly addressed.

My parents, like Abner and Zoe Mikva, deeply believed in the values of our nation, the values passed along through the generations, and they taught me that we can never take the values of this country for granted. John F. Kennedy spoke for them and countless others when he said, “one person can make a difference, and everyone should try.”

The Mikva Challenge is trying to ignite that spark in the next generation.

There are many people in Chicago who have made a difference in the lives of others and who are worthy of this award. Many of you do as much work, or more work, than I do in this community, and you do so freely, giving of your time, your money and your leadership.

All of us here understand our responsibilities as citizens. We recognize the great values that we have inherited and cherish. We don’t do it for the fanfare. We serve because we feel fortunate and blessed in our own upbringing and circumstances, and realize that so many do not share in our good fortune.

By our example and through our mentoring, we can do much to shape the next generation, who, we hope, will eclipse us in their contributions, in their ability, to give back to the community.

As I travel the country for the Legal Services Corporation, I try to share this one belief, and I want to conclude with it tonight.

All of us here are keepers of a flame—maybe in some way we each have a candle—and as we pass this flame from one generation to the next, making sure that it burns brightly, we, as citizens, are answering the call of our country to keep faith with its founding values.

And, if we work hard and long enough, then by the glow we create together, we will lead the nation in the fulfillment of its promise for future generations.

Thank you very much.