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INNOVATIVE PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC DEFENDERS FEATURED IN NEW HBO DOCUMENTARY, “GIDEON’S ARMY”

July 9, 2013 - (Atlanta, GA) – An organization founded to boost the skills and passion of hardworking public defenders is the focus of a new documentary on cable network HBO, premiering this month. The film, titled “Gideon’s Army,” debuted July 1st and follows three public defenders in the program and their clients, bringing to light issues and potential solutions within our nation’s underfunded and understaffed public defense system.

The nonprofit group Gideon’s Promise takes public defenders of various experience levels through the process of the judicial system and provides them with comprehensive support, ongoing education and training to help them navigate high caseloads and provide quality representation for indigent clients accused of crimes. Gideon’s Promise provides a variety of programs for attorneys of various experience levels, from law clerks, new graduates and well-seasoned lawyers, including training mentors to work with younger attorneys across the southern United States.

Gideon’s Promise gets its name from the landmark 1963 court case, *Gideon v. Wainwright*, in which a poor defendant, Clarence Earl Gideon, fought all the way to the Supreme Court and won the right for the poor to have access to an attorney. At the time of Gideon’s case, there were 217,000 people in prisons across the country; today that population has exploded to 2.4 million (*U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics*).

The criminal justice system in the United States takes in roughly 12 million defendants a year and some **80% of those cannot afford a lawyer**. As a result, brutally underfunded public defenders are buried in cases, often handling hundreds of cases per year, leaving them only hours to spend on each case.

In some instances, poor defendants meet their attorneys for the first time just moments before their initial proceedings. These defendants – and their public defenders – face a nearly impossible, high-stakes choice: to fight and lose could mean a maximum sentence. To fight and hope to win, they will face prosecutors who have more money and more time, as well as a hefty arsenal of law enforcement and forensic resources. Far too often, defendants ‘take the deal,’ and plead guilty to a crime they didn’t commit.

Add budget cuts to the mix – cuts that hit the public defense system disproportionately hard – and you begin to feel and understand the insurmountable odds faced by public defense attorneys.

“Each of us is perhaps one paycheck, one illness, one accident away from being that accused person who needs a public defender,” said Jon Rapping, founder and president of Gideon’s Promise. “The pressure these public defenders feel to push cases through the system as quickly as possible – regardless of the innocence of their clients – is immense and that needs to change. These defendants are just as deserving of high-quality representation as the few who can afford to pay for their own private team.”

As many as 90% of poor clients charged with a crime plead guilty, many of whom agree to serve prison time, rather than spend years entangled in a legal battle. In some cases, clients do so to avoid what could be a life sentence, even if they are not guilty and/or evidence is weak (*Hastings Law Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 6, p. 1031, 2005-2006.).

“We have to rewire the minds of public defenders that they can win, that they don’t have to feel defeated,” said Rapping. “We have to change the culture of the judicial system to truly reflect ‘innocent until proven guilty’ and that all defendants deserve the right to a well-prepared defense that can present a real, viable challenge to their cases.”

The focus of Gideon’s Promise is to develop a generation of public defenders equipped with the skills and strategies to resist pressure to give into the status quo. Each year, a new class of public defenders begins a three-year, comprehensive program that includes a two-week boot camp, critical mentoring and support. Coordinated programming for graduates, leaders, trainers, mentors, and law students run throughout the year.

The HBO documentary, “Gideon’s Army” will have heavy play throughout the month of July and run on HBO’s networks thereafter. For a list of local show times, visit HBO’s web site at www.HBO.com or your local cable or satellite provider.

For more information on the work and mission of Gideon’s Promise, visit us online at www.GideonsPromise.org. “Like” us on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/GideonsPromise and follow us on Twitter at @Gideons_Promise.