

House Proposal Would Cut Civil Legal Aid by \$104 Million

Washington, DC—Funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) would be cut by 26 percent in Fiscal Year 2012 under a proposal announced by the House Appropriations Committee today. The Committee bill proposes a \$300 million budget for LSC—rolling back LSC funding to a level not seen since 1999.

Basic field grants, which are currently provided to 136 nonprofit civil legal aid programs across the nation, would be cut to \$274.4 million, a 27.5 percent reduction from current funding of \$378.6 million.

LSC's preliminary estimates show that about 235,000 low-income Americans eligible for civil legal assistance at LSC-funded programs would be turned away if the Committee proposal were enacted.

"The proposed cut would prove to be especially damaging to low-income persons whose health and safety are at risk—the elderly, the victims of domestic violence, the disabled, children, veterans and others—by denying them access to justice," LSC President James J. Sandman said.

"At LSC programs, requests for assistance are increasing. The poverty population eligible for civil legal assistance has grown by 17 percent since 2008, to an all-time high of 63 million Americans. And funding from non-federal sources is decreasing. This is not the time to undercut the fundamental American commitment to equal justice for all," Mr. Sandman said.

In April, Congress cut LSC funding by 4 percent for Fiscal Year 2011, to \$404.2 million from \$420 million. The impact of that cutback, combined with reductions in state funds, Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts and other funding sources, has put many LSC-funded programs under great financial stress.

LSC-funded programs by the end of 2011 project net staff reductions of 445 employees, including more than 200 attorneys, because of layoffs and attrition, according to survey responses provided by 121 of the 136 LSC-funded programs. In

the responses, 57 percent of the programs project budget deficits for 2011 totaling more than \$19 million. Forty-two percent of the respondents said they had imposed a salary freeze, and 31 percent anticipate reducing employee benefits this year.

Some LSC-funded programs have dipped into reserve funds to postpone downsizing and reduced client services, but almost all report that continued cuts to their funding in 2012 will lead to layoffs, office closures and reduced services to clients. Many rural areas, where there are not enough private lawyers to volunteer pro bono services, will be especially vulnerable to office closures because they are already minimally staffed.

Last year, the 136 nonprofit programs funded by LSC closed nearly 1 million cases, which affected 2.3 million people. The legal aid programs also assisted an additional 1.4 million Americans, through referrals to private lawyers, self-help workshops and other services.

From 2009 to 2010, foreclosure cases were up 20 percent at LSC-funded programs; unemployment compensation cases increased 10.5 percent; landlord-tenant disputes rose by 7.7 percent; bankruptcy, debt relief and consumer finance cases were up by nearly 5 percent, and domestic violence cases increased by 5 percent.

“Never in American history has the need for federal support for access to justice been clearer. We look forward to working with the Congress in the coming weeks on continuing and expanding civil legal assistance to low-income Americans,” Mr. Sandman said.

Established by Congress in 1974, LSC is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that promotes equal access to justice and funds high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income individuals and families. LSC-funded programs provide legal services to persons at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline.

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