

# States Up Support For Legal Services

State legislatures have been contributing more than ever to legal services this year. According to the American Bar Association’s Project to Expand Resources for Legal Services, 16 state legislatures have funded legal aid for the first time, reinstated funding, or increased it. Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Texas, and Washington all benefited from their state governments’ goodwill this year. Some modestly—Montana stands to gain \$35,000 a year from a \$10 increase on filing fees for dissolution of marriages—but some handsomely, with Minnesota, Texas and Iowa receiving significant appropriations. What is more, in these three cases the awards came about as a result of the strong relationships legal aid programs have forged with others over the years, proving that it never hurts to have a little help from your friends.

## Minnesota

More than twenty years of concerted efforts to raise state funding for legal services in Minnesota paid off this year, when the legislature increased the legal aid budget from \$7.3 million to \$12.3 million. The \$5 million will come from a \$4 increase on real estate document filing fees, a measure championed by the President and CEO of the Minnesota Association of Realtors, Glenn Dorfmann. According to Bruce Beneke, Executive Director of Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, “[Dorfman] knows legal aid, he likes legal aid, and he feels like he knows what he gets for his money. He’s one of the most influential lobbyists in the state, and he went out of his way to help us make the case that legal aid was a great investment.”

Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Kathleen Blatz was also no stranger to state legislators this year, frequently urging them to boost legal aid funding, which is a line item in the high court’s budget. “We at the courts are especially appreciative of

the services legal aid provides. For many people, legal aid makes real the constitutional guarantee that all people have access to the courts—regardless of economic status. Without legal aid, the courts simply could not fulfill our commitment to ensuring fair access

to justice for all Minnesotans.”

This level of support—among legislators, judges and real-

tors—comes after twenty years of an intense concerted effort by the

Minnesota State Bar and the state’s legal aid programs to educate both Republicans and Democrats about the absolutely necessary work legal aid contributes to the justice system.

Beneke, who has long been active in fundraising at the state level, attributes this year’s success to the hard work put in year after year by so many people

to maintain good relationships with those in positions to help legal aid. “When I’m not working at legal aid, I’m a football coach, and [working for this increase] was really like football: all of us on a team, each in our different position, carrying out our assignments. And we did a good job.”



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—Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Kathleen Blatz



**\$3,000,000**  
FOR LEGAL SERVICES

### Texas

Burdened with a poverty population of 16% in 2004—only a handful of states had more poor people—Texas ranked 40th in the nation in per capita funding for legal services. Yet the Lone Star State certainly is not lacking in legal services supporters at all levels of government, as everyone from President Bush to Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison to state Supreme Court Chief Justice Wallace B. Jefferson to Texas First Lady Anita Perry have all gone on record in support of legal services. Sometimes, it just takes a little creativity to come up with the money. And the bipartisan coalition of state legislators that recently awarded an additional \$3 million in funding for legal services were definitely creative. The funds will be collected over the next two years from revenue generated by the Model Court Collection Act, a new piece of legislation aimed at radically improving the way courts in Texas collect fines and fees. Currently, it is estimated that between \$300 to \$400 million a year are lost because of shoddy collection methods. State Senator Robert Duncan (R-Lubbock) and Representative Sylvester Turner (D-Houston) sat on the budget conference committee and fought to ensure that some of the new funds would go to legal aid. “Ensuring that everyone has appropriate representation is essential to our legal system. Legal aid levels the playing ground so that every individual can be represented in the same way as multi-million dollar corporations. This additional funding is

just one step in the long road to adequately funding legal aid in Texas,” said Senator Duncan. “Justice is a bipartisan issue,” added Representative Turner. “As such it is my expectation that we can continue to identify funding mechanisms...to ultimately make ‘Justice for All’ a reality for all Texans.” Betty Balli Torres, Executive Director of the Texas Equal Access to Justice Foundation, will distribute the new funds to over 40 legal services programs in the state. “In those instances where programs were looking at lay-offs of legal staff, these funds will allow them to maintain the staff and continue providing services.”

### Iowa

Iowa’s state legislature recently awarded \$900,000 to LSC-funded Iowa Legal Aid (ILA), which provides legal services to low-income Iowans in all of the Hawkeye State’s 99 counties. This infusion of funds could not have come at a better time, as the program has been struggling since a combination of state, federal and IOLTA funding cuts cost the program nearly 20% of its budget in 2002. Forced to lay off 22 attorney positions, some ILA branch offices housed a mere two attorneys who were responsible for a service area covering 13 counties. The new funding stream will replenish some of these barren offices with fresh attorneys, allowing the program to serve more of the state’s poor citizens with serious legal problems. Moreover, the legislature made legal aid funding a line item in the state’s budget under the Attorney General’s office. This by no means ensures automatic annual funding, but it does allow the state’s highest lawyer to submit a yearly funding request on behalf of legal aid. Perhaps more importantly, the legislature established the principle that securing access to justice for the poor is a necessary function of state government, a principle that might resonate with future legislators. The Iowa State Bar’s Board of Governors and the Iowa Trial Lawyers Association both fought for the increase at the state capitol, where they were given a sympathetic ear by appropriators on both sides of the aisle. ■



**\$900,000**  
FOR LEGAL SERVICES



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