

Idaho Legal Aid Shuttering Offices to Save Money

JOHN MILLER - Associated Press

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BOISE, Idaho — Money woes are forcing a non-profit legal aid outfit that helps thousands of Idaho's poorest residents to begin shuttering its offices on selected days.

Idaho Legal Aid Services, which has already cut hours of its staff and 21 attorneys, has a \$250,000 hole in its \$2.6 million annual budget. Its leaders say employees at nine offices will now take forced days off without pay starting on May 27. If that's not enough, layoffs could be in the offing, said deputy director James Cook.

Congress in April cut about \$15.8 million from the federal agency that provides about 60 percent of Idaho Legal Aid Services' funding.

And a bill in the 2011 Idaho Legislature that would have shored up its coffers died amid opposition from the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, which has tangled with Legal Aid Services in the past over labor laws that govern migrant workers.

Cook says the demise of this year's legislation kept Idaho as the only state that doesn't provide any funding for legal aid for poor people to get assistance with domestic violence cases, disputes with their landlords, foreclosures, child abuse and neglect cases.

"The sad part about it is, the population that's eligible for our services has gone up," Cook said. "Part of the problem is, our budget has remained the same for a long time."

With the recent recession, the number of Idaho residents living at 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines and are eligible for services from Legal Aid has swelled to 187,000, Cook said. The group says only one in five of Idaho's indigent seeking help

are able to be served because of lack of funds and a reduced staff.

Idaho Legal Aid has seven offices in Idaho Falls, Pocatello, Twin Falls, Boise, Caldwell, Lewiston and Coeur d'Alene, as well as two satellite offices in Nampa and Boise.

It provides direct legal assistance to more than 2,000 people annually, as well as advice over two telephone hot lines - for seniors and domestic-violence victims - to another roughly 2,000 people.

Congress in April cut the 2011 budget for the federal Legal Services Corporation to \$404.2 million, from \$420 million in 2010. That's where Idaho Legal Aid gets more than half of its funding, with the rest coming from grants and donations.

Anticipating a cut, Idaho Legal Aid leaders went to state lawmakers in March with hat in hand, hoping to convince them to add a \$10 user fee on civil cases in Idaho's courts. That would have raised an additional \$800,000 annually - money to help victims of domestic violence, abused and neglected children, elder exploitation, foreclosures, and veterans' issues, according to the legislation.

Though it passed the House on a narrow 38-32 vote, the bill didn't get a hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee after opposition from the Idaho Farm Bureau.

Old animosities, it turns out, may have helped stall the bill.

Back in 1996, the Idaho Farm Bureau and Idaho Legal Aid were on opposite sides of the debate to extend workers compensation to injured farm workers, with the Farm Bureau fighting the measure and Legal Aid promoting it as a protection for migrant workers who help harvest the state's crops.

The Farm Bureau lost that battle, but the advocacy group continues to oppose measures that help Idaho Legal Aid.

"What's that money going to be used for?" John Thompson, a spokesman for the Farm Bureau, told The Associated Press on Thursday. "The bill spelled out that the money was supposed to be used for helping people who need it. We don't oppose that. But at the same time, does that money free up the organization to do other things that could adversely affect agriculture?"

Cook insists his group hasn't been a thorn in Idaho agriculture's side.

"We do have a farmworker unit, but it's tiny," he said, adding most of Idaho Legal Aid's representation is focused on victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Idaho Legal Aid does plan to return to the 2012 Legislature in another bid to pass the funding legislation.

Last updated on December 12, 2011.

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