

In Support of Funding for Connecticut's Legal Aid Network  
Peter Goselin, National Lawyers Guild-Connecticut  
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My name is Peter Goselin. I am a partner in the law firm of Livingston, Adler, Pulda, Meiklejohn & Kelly here in Hartford, and I am also the coordinator for the Connecticut chapter of the National Lawyers Guild.

I am here this evening to speak with urgency in support of increased funding for the Connecticut Legal Aid network.

Legal aid organizations play a critical role in making the voices of Connecticut's working poor heard. Let me cite one example: the wage collection clinic run by the Stamford office of Connecticut Legal Services.

In two years, the clinic has assisted hundreds of working people who have been cheated out of wages by employers. They are laborers and construction workers, dishwashers and prep cooks and busboys, the people who clean office buildings and those who work in domestic service.

How much of a need does the CLS clinic address? The clinic regularly services twenty to forty people during each two to three hour bimonthly session. On an evening last Summer, clinic staff and volunteers were forced to divide clients into two groups: more than thirty workers were interviewed in the clinic offices while another fifteen met with lawyers in the parking lot outside.

How much is at stake with programs like the wage collection clinic? Here are a few of the cases on which I have had the privilege of working with clinic attorneys over the last two years:

Seven janitors who worked more than sixty hours a week but who were paid less than the minimum wage and were not paid overtime for more than two years.

Three laborers who together were owed about \$12,000 and who, when the employer learned that they were seeking legal assistance, were subjected to death threats.

A live-in domestic worker for an affluent family who was paid what amounted to approximately \$1.32 an hour for her work.

A group of twelve workers, each employed by one of three different businesses operated by the same employer. The employer pays less than minimum wage in one business, does not pay overtime to workers in any of his businesses, and routinely gets rid of workers by simply no longer paying them until they became discouraged and quit. Amount of wages in dispute: between \$60,000 and \$70,000.

When the Legal Aid network helps people like this, it means that landlords get paid, medical bills get paid, kids go to school in decent clothes. This is an investment into the economy by working to put money into the hands of those who need it most to survive. It is also a direct investment in building a society in which hard work is rewarded and human labor has dignity.

But programs like the wage clinic cannot survive on our good intentions. The collapse of the real estate market means an incredible 64% loss in funding for the Connecticut Legal Aid network and a budget shortfall of \$8-\$9 million. All of the state's legal services organizations have cut wages, hours of operation, and staff. Yes, at a time when the economic crisis most threatens Connecticut's working poor, one of the best advocates for the working poor must reduce its operations. The Stamford wage clinic already dangles from a shoestring comprised mostly of overworked – and now, underpaid -- CLS attorneys and staff and a network of dedicated community volunteers. How can this clinic survive with even fewer resources in the coming year?

This year more than any other, you are faced with hard choices, and I do not envy you your task. But in considering funding for the Connecticut Legal Aid network, please keep in mind that the uncomfortable choices that you must make pale in comparison to the choices faced by people who rely on legal services for help. The work that legal services does for them is vital to their survival and also to their dignity as workers and our dignity as a people. I trust you will make good choices in their interest.

Thank you.

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