

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing

Testimony on Governor Rell's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan

Sen. Harp, Rep. Geragosian and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee: My name is Rafael Rodriguez Cruz. I have been working as an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid since 1997, in the areas of family law and disability (including children's disabilities). I am here to ask you, distinguished legislators, not to slash Legal Aid funding. My work has a direct impact on the lives of individuals who are facing terrible odds: a child with autism or spine bifida, a mother without money victimized by an abuser and who wants to get a divorce, a disabled adult who has no income and cannot work. As a legal aid attorney, I am their voice in the court and before the relevant administrative agencies, so that they receive the legal representation to which they are entitled. It is precisely during these times of economic turmoil that our work at GHLA has become a matter of extreme urgency for our clients. Too often children with severe impairments in Hartford do not get the help educational, specialized medical treatment and benefits that they need, unless they have an attorney from GHLA fighting for them. Adults with disabilities are forced to apply for state assistance because they have been denied a valid disability claim. A victim of domestic violence goes without child support and other financial assistance from the abuser. If we were not there, simply put, no one would do the job of helping them, as they have no money to hire a private attorney. Indirectly, my job keeps disabled individuals and victims of domestic violence from becoming poorer than they already are. A disabled individual who gets SSI with our help is someone who no longer depends on state assistance. A disabled child who gets SSI benefits has the opportunity of breaking the cycle of poverty. The same thing happens with victims of domestic violence who get child support. They can move out of dependence on state financial assistance. Our staff has already been reduced 25% and we all took a salary reduction. So, we are already operating under dire circumstances. I urge you, distinguished legislators, not to slash legal aid funding, as it would have a terrible impact on the lives of my clients.