

Judiciary Committee Chair and Members
February 26, 2009

My name is Suzy Rivera. I am the Outreach Programs Director of the Friendship Service Center of New Britain. I also am a resident of New Britain. I appreciate the work that you do in governing, especially during this very difficult economic and budgetary situation in which we find ourselves now.

I am speaking in support of Bill 5148 concerning Judicial Branch Funding. Specially, I would like to encourage you to ensure that Legal Aid actually gets any money allocated to them by the legislature. To do otherwise would be financially foolish and severely detrimental to our vulnerable neighbors, single people and parents, and the children who live in those units.

The Friendship Center is an agency with a Continuum of Care approach to providing services for the working poor, the disenfranchised, those experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. We have; 37 emergency shelter beds for women, men & children in addition to having a no-freeze policy, 15 rooms of transitional housing for men & women, 31 units of scattered site Permanent Supportive Housing, a soup kitchen, an emergency needs/homeless prevention program, and we are part of the municipal committee that administers and the fiduciary for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing (HPRP) funds. We will soon have 21 apartments in 2 buildings for Permanent Supportive Housing.

In New Britain, shelter numbers are up. At the Friendship Service Center of New Britain, our shelter overflow needs are well beyond capacity. Our Community Soup Kitchen is feeding more and more people each month. Our Emergency Needs Program struggles to provide a tiny bit of financial assistance to a rising number of people. Even with our Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (the Federal Stimulus money), our community is in crisis. People seeking assistance have longer work histories and independent housing stays. Formerly stable people are moving into instability. People are facing the choice of doubling up or dying. But, doubling up sometimes causes another household to be at risk of eviction or losing a valuable housing certificate. This is affecting the "working poor," landlords, as well as those with addictions and medical or psychiatric disabilities – our most vulnerable neighbors.

Our partnership with Legal Aid is critical to working with these vulnerable people in our community. Though our staff advocate on behalf of our clients daily, there are many things that only a lawyer can do or should do. Our clients cannot afford a private attorney for these issues. Legal Aid provides legal information to us and others as we work with our clients. Legal Aid also provides the representation necessary in mediation with other attorneys or parties or in court. These services are invaluable.

As I stated before, our community is in crisis. This crisis often directly affects a person's housing. They also have a multiplier effect for landlords, children, and others who are financially and emotionally connected to the person. Recently, a family faced the potential of eviction. The HPRP was working to provide a relocation opportunity to the family. However, more time was needed before the new apartment would be ready. Legal Aid provided the negotiation for a longer stay, with the provision of additional funding from HPRP. The end result was that the family was able to move from one apartment to another than they can more easily afford. The children did not experience the trauma of doubling up or shelter living. In addition, the landlord avoided additional court costs. This win-win result would not have been possible without the legal guidance of the Legal Aid attorney.

In another situation, a mother of 2 children had been denied her Social Security Disability benefits. Her appeal had also been denied. This was a surprise to those who knew her. An attorney

she consulted was very willing to take the case, for a steep fee. We referred her to Legal Aid. The Legal Aid attorney advocated on her behalf and obtained a favorable decision quickly, more quickly than it usually takes with other attorneys. The rapid decision, payment, and reduced fees withheld made it possible for the family to pay off loans from families and bills, obtain a car, and set aside some money. The family has been stabilized because of the invaluable assistance of the Legal Aid attorney.

Ensuring that Legal Aid obtains the funding they need and all of the funding the legislature allocates to them is the right thing to do economically and emotionally. It is financially responsible and compassionate. I strongly encourage you to do the right thing, for our most vulnerable neighbors, and for the financial situation of our entire state.

Thank you.

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