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Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on the Governor's Proposed Budget
February 19, 2013
Testimony of Susan Nofi-Bendici

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Susan Nofi-Bendici, Executive Director of New Haven Legal Assistance. I am speaking tonight on behalf of New Haven Legal Assistance, Connecticut Legal Services, and Greater Hartford Legal Aid to thank this Committee for its support of funding for legal services for the poor.

The Governor and the Judicial Branch have proposed flat funding of the $1.5 million legal services funding in the Judicial Branch Budget. This funding, along with the revenue from the court filing fees passed by the legislature last year and in 2009, has kept legal services to the poor from collapsing when revenues from IOLTA - Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts - collapsed.

Over the past four years, we've cut our expenses, staff has made extraordinary sacrifices, our capacity has gotten smaller and our budgets are still tight because the revenue from the new filing fees is coming in around 10% lower than had been expected. At the same time, the number of people in poverty keeps growing, as does the number of unrepresented parties in our courts and administrative agencies.

Despite these challenges, Connecticut's legal aid programs have continued to work for equal access to our justice system, and have positively impacted the lives of poor people. For example, during the last fiscal year advocates from Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid and New Haven Legal Assistance have worked with over a thousand victims of domestic violence, and helped over a thousand other people facing homelessness as a result of eviction or loss of subsidies. We have helped disabled adults access benefits, helped disabled children avoid school expulsion, helped elderly people get the medical and nursing home care that they need, helped people with unemployment benefits and abusive consumer collections. Most of our clients are children, elderly, or disabled, and they face crises that can be averted with the help of legal aid advocates.

Our three programs combined assisted in over 10,000 legal matters in 2012. We could not have sustained this level of services without the support of this Legislature, the Governor, and the Judicial Branch. We greatly appreciate this support and the continuation of the $1.5 million for legal services funding in the Judicial Branch Budget.

Thank you for your time tonight. I'd be happy to answer any questions.