



Connecticut Legal Services



NEW HAVEN
LEGAL
ASSISTANCE
ASSOCIATION, INC.

**Testimony of Ben Solnit, President, New Haven Legal Assistance Board of Directors
Before the Appropriations Committee - February 19, 2016**

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Ben Solnit, and I am here tonight to thank you for all you have done to support vitally needed funding for civil legal services for poor people, and ask for your continued support in this session. I am the President of the New Haven Legal Assistance Board of Directors, and with me are Susan Garcia Nofi, Executive Director of New Haven Legal Assistance; Jamey Bell, Executive Director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid; and Deborah Witkin, Deputy Director of Connecticut Legal Services. Together our three organizations cover the entire state of Connecticut, and I am testifying on behalf of all of us.

Legal aid staff provide services to thousands of low-income Connecticut residents in crisis every year: victims of domestic violence, renters facing evictions and homelessness, disabled children seeking federal benefits and educational services, seniors with nursing home issues, and more. Due to ongoing reductions in two primary sources of funding for legal aid (Court filing fee revenues and IOLTA - Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts) legal aid staffing and services have shrunk by about 20% since 2008. Despite staff layoffs, restructuring of advocacy efforts, unpaid furlough days, attrition and constant fundraising efforts, legal aid programs continue to face severe projected budget deficits that create a need for improved funding to avoid further cuts in staffing and services.

The help we request to address this funding crisis is that you:

- Avoid the proposed deep cuts to the Judicial Branch budget, which includes a line item for the Judicial Grants-in-Aid program that funds legal services for the poor; and
- Reject the proposed \$720,000 cut to Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funding for legal aid that is in the DSS budget.

House Bill 5044, An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017, proposes deep cuts to the Judicial Branch's budget and would put pressure on the line item in that budget to fund legal services for the poor. Even if that line item is preserved, the proposed cut to the Judicial Branch will compound the challenges low-income people face in accessing the legal system. The numbers of individuals appearing in court without a lawyer because they cannot afford one has continued to grow. The Chief Justice and the Judicial Branch have responded by instituting programs to increase *pro bono* services generously donated by private attorneys. The Judicial Branch also provides services to self-represented

parties and all courthouse patrons, including court forms, public access computers, and information about courtroom procedures. Any major cuts the Judicial Branch is forced to make, whether cutting staff and programs or closing courthouses, will be disproportionately felt by Connecticut's poorest citizens.

House Bill 5044 further proposes the elimination of \$720,000 in Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funding for legal aid. Even without this cut, legal aid funding is in crisis. We are exploring other possible solutions to the crisis, outside of general fund expenditures, such as the client security fund and increased court fees. Cutting Legal Aid's SSBG funding will deepen the crisis and make even more reductions of staff and services unavoidable. We already unable to meet the great need for our services. Our work made a profound difference in the lives of the 28,000 low-income people we were able to serve last year: but with 377,000 Connecticut residents living in poverty, we were forced to turn away many people who qualified for legal aid. If SSBG funds are eliminated, even fewer low-income residents of Connecticut will be able to access legal help each year. We recognize Connecticut's budget challenges and the very difficult choices that must be made. However, we ask that SSBG funding for legal aid be restored. Further reductions in legal aid will increase costs in other safety net programs, and deny access to justice to people who cannot afford a lawyer.

We also oppose the proposed elimination of Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) funding to the Connecticut Legal Rights Project. CLRP provides legal services to low income people with psychiatric disabilities, protecting their civil rights and preventing their clients from becoming homeless and/or institutionalized. Their work is critical and, given our own funding crisis, we could not possibly absorb the clients CLRP will no longer be able to serve if their DHMAS funding is cut.

In conclusion, please take any steps you can to address the legal aid funding crisis, including protecting the legal aid line item in the Judicial Branch budget, and rejecting the proposed cut to Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funding for legal services. Thank you for your past support of legal aid, and thank you for your time tonight. If you have any questions, we would be happy to answer them.