



**Judiciary Committee**

Senate Bill No. 426, *An Act Creating a Task Force to Improve Access to Legal Counsel in Civil Matters*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of women, girls and their families.

I am writing in support of Senate Bill No. 426, *An Act Creating a Task Force to Improve Access to Legal Counsel in Civil Matters*. The legislation would create a task force to study the nature, extent and consequences of unmet legal needs of Connecticut residents in civil matters.

There is broad agreement that individuals and families without an attorney to represent them in civil matters are at a substantial disadvantage in the court system. CWEALF strongly believes that the civil legal system needs modernizing to provide access to representation for those without the funds to hire an attorney.

Because hiring an attorney in the U.S. is very expensive – often \$200 to \$300 an hour and more - a very large percentage of people who are struggling to make ends meet, as well as people considered middle-class, cannot afford to have legal representation in civil matters. In the current system, many people go without legal assistance for matters as critical as saving their home, living free of domestic abuse, maintaining custody of their children and working without discrimination.

While legal services organizations are skilled in providing legal help to people near or below the poverty line, they are inadequately funded, so they cannot serve everyone who requests their help. They also necessarily turn away large numbers of people who seek their assistance with incomes just over the poverty line. According to the National Center for Access to Justice, there are fewer than two legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 low-income people in Connecticut.<sup>1</sup>

Access to affordable legal help also would save money in the long run by reducing the costs from a person or family in crisis to be spread to local, state and federal governments, and thus to taxpayers. For example, if a family has a lawyer who prevents their wrongful eviction, the government would not need to spend funds to house the family at a homeless shelter, provide them food, and transport their children to their school, which may be in another location.

CWEALF helps to fill the civil legal justice gap for those who must face the legal system alone. CWEALF's Legal Education program provides includes three direct services: the Information and Referral (I&R) Service, in-depth Bilingual Community Advocacy, and Community

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Access to Justice, The Justice Index, based on research completed in November 2014.

Education. These programs provide free and accessible legal information and support to individuals statewide, helping them to navigate legal and social service systems on issues primarily related to family law and employment discrimination. We also operate a Cooperating Attorney Network (CWEALF C.A.N.) of skilled attorneys throughout the state who provide free consultations to CWEALF clients and offer reduced fees or sliding scales.

CWEALF's I&R Line frequently receives phone calls and emails from people referred to our organization from the legal aid network because they do not meet the income guidelines to receive free legal services. One-third of our clients reach CWEALF in this manner, as we do not maintain income eligibility requirements. Our most frequent client is a woman who earns less than \$25,000 a year with at least one dependent. Though her income may not qualify her for free legal aid, she cannot afford a lawyer on her own.

Our Legal Education Program helped approximately 1200 individuals in 2014 – 2015 via these services, with most coming from the Greater Hartford area and New Haven. More than 250 clients accessed CWEALF's advocacy services, available to individuals who have encountered barriers to successfully resolving their cases on their own. They are typically proceeding *pro se* (self-represented) and need support to identify and translate court documents, explain court and agency procedures, and navigate the legal system.

The Latino population in Connecticut is even less likely to have access to legal representation or to the legal system, and many documents are still unavailable in Spanish. CWEALF provides bilingual support and advocacy to Spanish-speaking clients across the state. Nearly 34% of individuals helped by CWEALF report they are Hispanic, and more than 20% of individuals helped by CWEALF speak only Spanish. Individuals in the immigrant population are less likely to pursue cases due to intimidation, lack of support, and fear of adverse legal consequences. ***For these reasons, we suggest appointing to the task force an organization with expertise in serving non-primary English speakers.***

The frequent use of our Legal Education Program by Connecticut residents demonstrates the legal system's failure to meet the needs of most individuals involved in civil legal matters, who are priced out of the market for legal services. We urge your support of Senate Bill No. 426, and hope that the establishment of a task force such as the one proposed in this legislation is just a first step in the implementation of a system that provides all Connecticut residents the right to meaningful access to the legal justice system.