



Greater Hartford Legal Aid



Connecticut Legal Services



NEW HAVEN  
LEGAL  
ASSISTANCE  
ASSOCIATION, INC.

**Testimony of Ben Solnit, President, New Haven Legal Assistance Board of Directors  
Before the Judiciary Committee on March 1, 2016**

**In Support of S.B. 428, An Act Concerning Funding of Legal Services for the Poor.**

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Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Ben Solnit, and I am here in support of S.B. 428, which would address the legal aid funding crisis. I want 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 Edward Heath, Vice Chair of the Greater Hartford Legal Aid Board of Directors; Susan Garcia Nofi, Executive Director of New Haven Legal Assistance; Jamey Bell, Executive Director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid; and Steve Eppler-Epstein, Executive 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.

To address this funding crisis, we ask that you support S.B. 428, which would do two things:

- Raise the court filing fees that currently produce revenue for legal aid by a modest 3.5%. These fees have not been raised since 2012 and, in most cases, would result in an increase of \$5 or \$10;
- Give the Judicial Branch the ability to grant available funds held in the Client Security Fund to the Connecticut Bar Foundation to fund legal services for the poor.

To address our funding shortfall, we are extremely active raising money from lawyers and other donors, and pursuing foundation funding. We have had some success with that but it is just nowhere near enough to meet the funding need. Without S.B. 428, we face a shared budget shortfall that would force us to lay off as many as twenty legal aid staff, which is on top of the 20% reduction in staff and services we have already seen.

As you know, in addition to being a source of justice for low-income people in Connecticut, we

also help save the state resources with our work. When we help a victim of domestic violence to stay in her house, or when we help a person with their eviction case, we reduce the need for vital safety net services from other parts of our system. When we prove to federal authorities that an individual qualifies for federal disability benefits, we help bring federal dollars into the state of Connecticut (and often the State receives a portion of retroactive disability awards). And when we help low-income families receive WIC or food stamp benefits, we help bring other federal dollars into the state which directly improve nutrition, health and development of the generation that is our state's future.

For all of these reasons, we also strongly support S.B. 426, which would establish a task force to study the impact of the lack of access to counsel in civil matters, and make recommendations to improve Connecticut residents' access to justice.

Thank you for your past support of legal aid, and thank you for your time today. If you have any questions, we would be happy to answer them.