

March 9, 2021

Via E-mail

Chair Jamie Becker-Finn
House Judiciary Finance and Civil Law Committee
559 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155
rep.jamie.becker-finn@house.mn

Chair Warren Limmer
Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Finance and Policy Committee
3221 Minnesota Senate Building
St. Paul, MN 55155
Sen.Warren.Limmer@senate.mn

Re: Funding for Civil Legal Services

Dear Chairs Becker-Finn and Limmer:

I write to express my support in the strongest possible terms for continued and expanded funding for civil legal services. I know firsthand, both as a lawyer, and from my service as Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, of the immeasurable value provided to the legal system by civil legal services.

The Minnesota Legal Services Coalition provides vital civil legal aid to a wide range of Minnesotans on a statewide basis: women seeking protection from domestic violence, families struggling to stay in their homes, homeless veterans seeking the benefits they earned, disaster victims needing help to recover. Civil legal aid is essential to individuals living in rural areas that large law firms have difficulty serving because of lawyers' geographic location. In many counties across our state, civil legal aid services are the only available help for low-income Minnesotans.

My firm is among the leaders in supporting Civil Legal Services funding, both by direct contributions to organizations that are part of the Minnesota Legal Services

Coalition, and the provision of hundreds of hours of volunteer legal services to individuals in desperate need of assistance. This volunteer service is not independent of the legal aid agencies supported by legislative funding of Civil Legal Services – rather, our ability to provide pro bono legal services is directly dependent on partnership with legal aid organizations, which screen cases for merit and eligibility, and train and mentor our attorneys. Any reduction in the funding provided for civil legal services will not only imperil the ability of civil legal aid organizations to serve Minnesotans in need, it will also diminish the private bar’s capacity to help these individuals.

I have written in the past about the imperative need to fully fund the state justice system. *The High Cost of Efficiency: Courthouse Tech and Access To Justice*, 22 No. 4 Prof. Law. 16 (ABA, 2014); *Foreward: Legal Costs in Minnesota*, 39 Wm. Mitchell L. Rev. 1 (2012); *The State of The Judiciary*, 67-AUG Bench & B. Minn. 20. It is not only the right thing to do, but studies show that a well-functioning justice system is a positive contributor to the overall economic well-being of a state. *The Economics of Justice*, Eric J. Magnuson, et al, Defense Research Institute (2014). Simply put, businesses choose to invest in places where they will have access to a fair, efficient and prompt system of courts to resolve their disputes.

Minnesota is fortunate to be among those places. But to maintain that position, we need to continue and in fact increase our investment in the justice system. Fully funding Civil Legal Services is a vital part of that investment.

Because of civil legal aid’s ability to leverage private bar pro bono services, funding civil legal aid is money well spent. Numerous studies have shown that the effectiveness of legal aid programs results in a strong return on investment. The Minnesota Legal Services Advisory Committee’s annual report details the benefits of civil legal aid in Minnesota:
https://www.mncourts.gov/mncourtsgov/media/scao_library/documents/LSAC-Annual-Report-FY20.pdf.

Each dollar spent on legal aid not only provides a multiplied direct benefit, but the work of civil legal aid lawyers, both full-time and volunteer, helps our justice system function more efficiently. Pro se litigants, struggling to present their issues to the courts without legal assistance, dramatically slow down the judicial process as judges have to take significantly more time in processing their cases to ensure that the rights of all of the involved litigants are protected. Not only do civil legal service lawyers make that process more efficient, but in a large numbers of instances, civil legal service lawyers are able to explain to potential litigants the legal process and likely outcomes and facilitate resolution of disputes that never need to see the courtroom.

Funding Civil Legal Services in Minnesota should be a legislative priority. It is a smart, highly leveraged investment that pays significant dividends in helping our justice system maintain high quality, efficiency, and integrity.

Sincerely,



Eric J. Magnuson

cc: Drew P. Schaffer (via e-mail: dschaffer@mylegalaid.org)
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Minneapolis, MN 55403