

March 10, 2021

House Judiciary Finance and Civil Law Committee

Attn: Chair Becker-Finn and Minority Lead Peggy Scott

Dear Chair Becker-Finn and Minority Lead Scott,

As the Executive Director of Alexandra House, Inc., I am writing this letter to strongly encourage your support of increased funding to legal aid service providers throughout the state. The services they provide to the community are vital to all citizens but are especially critical to the victims of domestic and sexual violence. An increase in funding would directly impact their ability to provide family law legal services to victims/survivors who need legal services but are without the financial means necessary to hire an attorney.

As the only comprehensive domestic and sexual violence service provider in Anoka County, Alexandra House is in the unique position to provide insight on the growing and unmet need for family law legal services among the clients we serve. Judicare of Anoka County, our local legal aid provider, has done a tremendous job of attempting to meet this need, though with ever-tightening budgets and increased demand for services, this has been and continues to be a challenge. Many in need are inevitably turned away. Family law legal assistance is critically important to the victims/survivors we serve. Victims need free legal representation to assist them in gaining immediate safety from abuse by way of a protection order and longer-term assistance in securing their future through legal representation in dissolution, custody, or child support matters.

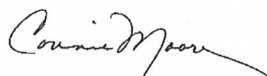
Alexandra House has witnessed the enormous impact legal aid services have had on our clients. We are fortunate to have worked closely with Judicare of Anoka County for decades. For over 15 years, Alexandra House has partnered with Judicare, Central Minnesota Legal Services, and the Anoka County Attorney's Office on the Order for Protection Project. The OFP Project, which provides legal representation to petitioners in their protection order proceedings, has had an enormous impact - effectively lessening a victim's fear and intimidation of the court process, ensuring relief such as child support or parenting time plans that prioritize the safety of the petitioner and her/his children and making it possible for petitioners who have a legal basis for seeking child support to successfully secure it within their final orders. Legal representation has also enhanced victim safety, because well-written and detailed orders improve law enforcement's ability to enforce and the system's ability to hold accountable those who violate them.

The contributions of Judicare and Central Minnesota Legal Services has ensured the success and sustainability of this invaluable project and represents their commitment to providing legal assistance to victims of domestic violence in Anoka County. These services were even more critical this past year due to the pandemic. In the early days of COVID, Anoka County District Court greatly limited in-person services, postponing many hearings while shifting others to virtual platforms. Due to the rapidly changing court processes and practices and resulting challenges brought about by COVID, having legal representation made all the difference to the clients we serve, many of whom may not have followed through without this assistance.

We recently partnered with Judicare on a Minnesota Legal Services Coalition-led initiative called the Minnesota Legal Kiosk Project. Through creation of a statewide network of kiosks, we now can provide our clients the ability to apply online for legal aid assistance, meet with their legal aid attorney, and attend court virtually. These community-based kiosks make it possible for clients who face technology or transportation barriers to have a healthy and safe experience interacting with legal aid attorneys and the civil legal system. This Project will have positive benefits for our clients throughout the pandemic and beyond.

I urge you to support increased funding to legal aid service providers in Minnesota. Increased funding will enhance their capacity to serve low-income individuals, particularly in family law, where the unmet need is so great.

Sincerely,



Connie Moore
Executive Director