

Table of Contents

KY Legal Aid Directors Joint Letter Regarding Elimination of Access to Justice Funds

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KENTUCKY LEGAL AID DIRECTORS JOINT LETTER REGARDING ELIMINATION OF ACCESS TO JUSTICE FUNDS

We are deeply disappointed the Governor is proposing to eliminate the Access to Justice civil legal aid funding in his 2018 budget. We understand the state's funding shortfall, but like public safety, legal aid funding provides a vital service and is a safety net for more than 50,000 veterans, hard-working families, and low-income individuals. Civil legal aid serves Kentuckians in all 120 counties who otherwise cannot afford essential legal services and allows them to remain productive, working citizens of our Commonwealth. We have been talking with key legislative leaders and hope the General Assembly will see the importance in providing funding for these valuable services.

"Kentucky's four civil legal aid programs work together to give Kentuckians equal footing in our court system" said Neva-Marie Polley Scott, Executive Director for Legal Aid Society in Louisville. She continued, "Without adequate funding of civil legal aid, thousands of Kentuckians will not have the services they need to remain physically and economically stable in our communities."

The Kentucky Courts have long recognized that civil legal aid works to ensure that citizens of the Commonwealth receive fair treatment in the judicial system. "With fiscal difficulties, it is tempting to postpone action or support for programs that, while often less visible, are nonetheless critically important", said Kentucky Supreme Court Chief Justice John D. Minton.

"If Access to Justice civil legal aid funding is eliminated, thousands of Kentuckians who are struggling to get by will be denied access to the justice and fairness made possible by free, basic legal services" said Amanda Young, Executive Director for Kentucky Legal Aid. Executive Director of AppalRed Legal Aid, Robert Johns added, "State funding for civil legal aid helps fulfill our nation's promise of justice for all. The loss of this critical funding would result in fewer senior citizens, veterans, disabled persons, and domestic violence victims receiving the legal help they so desperately need."

Glenda Harrison with the Kentucky Access to Justice Commission shared, "For more than 2 decades, Kentucky state government's contribution to funding the civil legal aid programs has shown commitment to ensuring that its poorest and most vulnerable citizens have equal access to justice. The legal aid programs and the pro bono attorneys who volunteer their services provide high quality legal representation to people at times when their lives are in crises; they have been battered; they cannot obtain health care or benefits after serving their country; they are frail and have lost their Social Security through a scam; they are about to lose their homes. The list goes on. Preserving the state dollars which fund the civil legal aid programs protects not only these individuals but also brings stability and value to the communities in which they live and shows Kentucky's commitment to the ideal to which we pledge: justice for all."

"We know that by helping clients with their civil legal issue we help the communities in which they live to thrive. Eliminating \$1.365 million in funding that has returned over \$10 million to the Commonwealth is short-sighted", said Joshua Crabtree, Executive Director of Legal Aid of the Bluegrass (LABG) citing a Return on Investment study recently completed for LABG.

Supreme Court Justice and Chairperson of the Access to Justice Commission, Justice Michelle Keller, reiterated the importance of funding civil legal aid: "Even in times of economic hardship, Kentucky has a proud history of financially supporting civil legal aid. The state has long recognized that ensuring access to the Courts for Kentuckians is an important cornerstone of democracy in our Commonwealth. The proposed elimination of state funding for civil legal aid would be catastrophic to our most vulnerable citizens".

Every day, Kentucky's four civil legal aid programs help veterans secure the benefits they have earned, assist domestic violence victims in obtaining protection orders against abusers, protect seniors from consumer scams, and help disaster survivors get back on their feet.

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[Print](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

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