Statement on the Proposed Elimination of Funding for the Legal Services Corporation

On March 6, 2017 the Trump Administration revealed a federal budget proposal that would eliminate funding for the Legal Services Corporation. The Austin Bar Association joins the American Bar Association and countless local and state bars from across the country in renouncing this proposed action.

The LSC ensures equal justice under the law by enabling access to the justice system for vulnerable citizens and provides the backbone for America’s civil legal-aid and pro bono system. According to the American Bar Association, the number of people qualifying for legal assistance has increased about 25% over the past decade, but funding is down 17.7% since 2010. Legal aid assists nearly 1.9 million Americans annually, including military and veterans, senior citizens, rural residents, women (nearly 70% of clients), and natural-disaster victims. Sadly, 50-80% of clients are turned away due to a lack of resources.

Texas has three LSC grantees: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Legal Aid of Northwest Texas, and Lone Star Legal Aid. Texas LSC grantees assisted over 131,000 Texans in 2017, including over 58,500 children. Approximately 6 million Texans, over 20% of the state’s population, are eligible for legal aid. The poverty population has increased by nearly 1.3 million people since 2000. The state currently receives $31,196,205 in federal funding from the LSC. This funding accounts for 54% of Texas’s total legal-aid dollars. Any reduction at the federal level will impact Texas more acutely than many other states.

Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan Hecht, in his address to the 85th Texas Legislature on February 1, 2017 said, “The justice system must be accessible to all. Justice only for those who can afford it is neither justice for all nor justice at all. The rule of law, so revered in this country, has no integrity if its promises and protections extend only to the well-to-do.”

Austin attorneys, along with attorneys from across Texas and the U.S., generously donate countless hours of time and services to pro bono clients, but pro bono work alone is a poor substitute for federal legal-aid funding. Access to the judicial system, the third branch of government and the bedrock of a free democracy, remains for all Americans—not just those who can afford to pay for an attorney—a fundamental right of American democracy.

The proposed elimination of all funding for the LSC is an affront to our democracy and to the legal system upon which it is based. The Austin Bar Association is proud to support the LSC and is deeply committed to serving the citizens of Austin and Central Texas to ensure equal access of justice for all.

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The Austin Bar Association is a nonprofit, voluntary association working to enhance the legal profession, administration of justice and the community through education, networking and public service.

The Austin Bar represents approximately 4,000 attorneys in the Austin area.