

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF BAR PRESIDENTS

The organization of the nation's present, past and future bar leaders

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April 20, 2010

United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Representatives and Senators:

As Presidents of State and Territorial Bar Associations and national Bars of Color, we urge Congress to work together to strengthen and improve the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) by providing at least \$435 million in funding and by enacting bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the program for the first time since 1981.

Thanks to your efforts and strong bipartisan support, for FY 2010 Congress provided a much-needed \$30 million increase bringing the annual appropriation up to \$420 million. This increase will help thousands of the most vulnerable Americans access critical legal assistance in matters where their home, their safety and their independence are at stake.

This year, we are asking Congress to provide another increase of at least \$15 million as the next step toward closing the justice gap and meeting the critical need that exists today because of the rise in foreclosures, unemployment and related issues resulting from the economic downturn. The President has requested \$435 million; the House of Representatives last year approved \$440 million.

At the beginning of the recession in 2008, 54 million Americans (including 18.5 million children) qualified for federally funded legal assistance. The 2009 LSC Justice Gap study reaffirms that one in every two individuals who qualified for and actually *sought* assistance from LSC-funded programs was denied help because of a lack of resources; even worse, in foreclosure cases, LSC-funded programs must turn away two eligible clients for every client served. The justice gap has grown and is likely to continue to grow this year as our country struggles to emerge from the current economic crisis. At the same time demand for help has increased, other major sources of funding for legal aid (including state appropriations, private giving and Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts revenue) are declining or are under severe stress.

The low-income and disadvantaged Americans who depend on LSC-funded legal aid organizations include: people facing wrongful foreclosure of their homes due to predatory lending and other consumer fraud; women and children victimized by domestic violence; veterans denied the benefits our country promised them; and many other vulnerable members of our communities. Whether these people have access to the legal help they need could mean the difference between shelter and homelessness; medical assistance and unnecessary physical suffering; food on a family's table and hunger; economic stability and bankruptcy; productive work and unemployment. The failure to resolve their basic legal issues causes even greater hardship for them and often leads to their reliance on other government programs.

LSC currently funds 136 local programs serving every county, state and Congressional District in the United States and its territories. These local programs provide direct services to approximately one million constituents who struggle to get by on incomes below or near the poverty line.

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The bipartisan LSC Board requested \$516.5 million for FY 2011 in its attempt to close the justice gap over the next several years. Without continued incremental increases in federal funding, many more will be denied assistance in the future. We request your support to increase LSC funding to at least \$435 million to help meet this urgent need.

Finally, LSC has not been reauthorized since 1981. Over those almost 30 years, many things have changed in the delivery of legal services and in corporate governance. For the first time in almost 20 years, legislation has been introduced in both the House and the Senate to reauthorize the program. We urge Congress to work together this year to come to an agreement on a reauthorization bill that will not only improve the efficiency and the delivery of legal services to low-income persons, but strengthen governance and accountability.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

Mary T. Torres
National Conference of Bar Presidents

Thomas J. Methvin
Alabama State Bar

Sidney K. Billingslea
Alaska Bar Association

Carolyn B. Lamm
American Bar Association

Raymond A. Hanna
State Bar of Arizona

Donna C. Pettus
Arkansas Bar Association

Howard B. Miller
The State Bar of California

David M. Johnson
Colorado Bar Association

Francis J. Brady
Connecticut Bar Association

Benjamin Strauss
Delaware State Bar
Association

James G. Flood
The Bar Association of the
District of Columbia

Jesse H. Diner
The Florida Bar

Bryan Cavan
State Bar of Georgia

Hugh R. Jones
Hawaii State Bar Association

Román D. Hernández
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State Bar of Michigan

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Association

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George R. Fair
The Mississippi Bar

H. A. "Skip" Walther
The Missouri Bar

Cynthia K. Smith
State Bar of Montana

Joseph J. Centeno
National Asian Pacific
American Bar Association

Mavis T. Thompson
National Bar Association

Lael R. Echo-Hawk
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Michael F. Kinney
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James J. Tenn, Jr.
New Hampshire Bar
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Barbara B. Weyher
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Ohio State Bar Association

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Oklahoma Bar Association

Kathleen A. Evans
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