October 17, 2012

Re: Sequestration Will Cripple our Justice System

Dear Bar Leader:

I am writing to share my recently published op-ed on the devastating impact that sequestration will have on our nation’s justice system and to ask you and your members to join forces with the ABA to prevent this outcome. I apologize for writing so many of my good friends such a formal letter, but I am sure you will understand, given the importance of speedy attention to this subject.

Unless Congress breaks the gridlock and agrees to an alternative bipartisan plan to reduce the deficit when it returns after the November elections, sequestration will be triggered on January 2, 2013, resulting in mandatory, indiscriminate, across-the-board budget cuts to nearly all federal programs. Sequestration will adversely affect our federal courts and federal-state partnerships that keep our streets safe and provide access to justice.

- Deep cuts to the judiciary’s budget will decimate staffing at federal courthouse across the country, requiring a reduction in force of 5,400 employees, including law clerks and probation officers. Courthouse security will be compromised when 370 court security officer positions cannot be funded and security equipment cannot be purchased. Some courthouses may even have to close down during the work week, deeply curtail services to the public, or terminate civil trials for a period of time to stay within a stripped-down budget.

- Programs that maintain access to justice for struggling families, the elderly, and so many others will also suffer. The Legal Services Corporation, whose budget will be slashed by an additional $29 million, will once again need to dramatically reduce grants to local aid providers.

- Federal programs that give states the resources to hire police officers and prosecutors to take violent criminals off the streets will be severely diminished. Initiatives such as state and local law enforcement assistance programs, juvenile justice programs, and efforts to combat sexual and domestic violence that have already endured budget cuts will be scaled back even further. Funds to monitor
child predators and youth violence prevention programs to address bullying, substance abuse and gangs are among those on the chopping block.

We hope that during these critical weeks before the election lawyers across the country will tell their congressional delegations that this is unacceptable and that Congress needs to take action and pass a bipartisan budget agreement that will avoid sequestration and preserve critical justice system funding.

There are so many ways to make your voices heard:
- Visit your Senators and Representatives in their district offices;
- Attend town hall meetings and ask your congressional member what he or she intends to do to avoid sequestration;
- Use social media to inundate your member’s district office with messages on a specified day; or
- Enlist your local news outlets to write a story specifically on the effects of sequestration on justice programs in your district or write your own op. ed. for publication.

As lawyers, we must not stand idly by and watch the administration of justice grind to a halt. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Laurel G. Bellows

Links to additional helpful information: