June 29th, 2017

Chairman John Culberson  
Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Justice and Science  
U.S. House Committee on  
Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Richard Shelby  
Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Justice and Science  
U.S. Senate Committee on  
Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Jose Serrano  
Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Justice and Science  
U.S. House Committee on  
Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Jeanne Shaheen  
Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Justice and Science  
U.S. Senate Committee on  
Appropriations  
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Chairmen Culberson and Shelby, Ranking Member Shaheen, and Ranking Member Serrano:

On behalf of organizations aiding survivors in the aftermath of disasters, we write in support of federal funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC).

Disasters are occurring with increasing frequency, and are becoming progressively more severe. Every Congressional district is vulnerable; each year, the President declares approximately 100 federal disasters, affecting an average of over 720 counties in Congressional districts across America.

Disaster legal services for low-income individuals are integral to the emergency management and disaster response framework. Disaster survivors are particularly desperate and vulnerable, and legal services personnel rise to the occasion when disaster strikes.

Federal law applicable to disasters can overwhelm survivors, such as: replacing Social Security cards and identification that meets U.S. Department of Homeland Security standards under the federal REAL ID Act, applying for the myriad of federal benefits and securing other federal assistance rights, filling out complicated forms, obtaining federal flood insurance payments, acquiring federal crop insurance payments, handling life insurance claims under 5 U.S.C. §8701 and other insurance claim issues, dealing with contractor scams and other “unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce” under the authority of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, paying federal and state income taxes, handling federal employment protections, collecting federal/state unemployment insurance, navigating federal
bankruptcy laws, contending with the numerous federal foreclosure and refinancing protections and requirements, obtaining new federal housing, coping with Family and Medical Leave Act rights, abiding other federal requirements, restrictions, and processes, and securing other federal rights.

Personnel from LSC grantees secure survivors’ federal rights. The federal government is integrally involved in disasters and has a crucial role in federal justice for all—a role not to be shunted to the states, tribes, and localities as an unfunded mandate. Such efforts are in direct support of the mandate expressed in Sec. 302 (b), 42 U.S.C. § 5143(b), of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Public Law 93-288, as amended (Stafford Act), to “assist local citizens and public officials in promptly obtaining assistance to which they are entitled.”

Additionally under the Stafford Act,

> Whenever the President determines that low-income individuals are unable to secure legal services adequate to meet their needs as a consequence of a major disaster, consistent with the goals of the programs authorized by this Act, the President shall assure that such programs are conducted with the advice and assistance of appropriate Federal agencies and State and local bar associations.

This mandate is carried out largely through a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Young Lawyers Division (YLD) of the American Bar Association (ABA). This MOA was originally executed in December, 1972, and renewed in 2007, and is fulfilled by way of the YLD’s Disaster Legal Services (DLS) Program. The DLS Program coordinates the pro-bono legal efforts of multiple State and local bar associations when activated by FEMA following a natural disaster. However, a great majority of these efforts are typically managed through LSC grantees associated with the impacted disaster area.

LSC grantees provide critical resources to ensure that disaster response efforts can be managed effectively and efficiently in accordance with the Stafford Act’s mandate and the terms of the FEMA/ABA YLD agreement. These resources can include meeting space, communications support, volunteer attorney coordination, leadership support, logistics coordination, and more. These entities are absolutely critical to ensure that legal services are provided to disaster survivors in their time of need.

During disasters, LSC handles the federal role in justice for all, maintaining regular communication with the American Red Cross and FEMA to coordinate response, convening regular national Legal Aid Disaster Network calls, and sponsoring the National Disaster Legal Aid website, [www.disasterlegalaid.org](http://www.disasterlegalaid.org). The Legal Services Corporation is advancing disaster preparedness plans, a mobile app, an interactive web
portal with online legal guidance and automated forms preparation, a multi-component toolkit, disaster response training, and preparedness workshops.

Large numbers of unrepresented disaster survivors can overwhelm courts. Equal justice under the law necessitates competent representation to prevent backlogs and to enable our justice system to function properly.

In conclusion, we affirm the importance of strong federal funding for the Legal Services Corporation, lest justice for all be compromised for our nation’s disaster survivors. The Stafford Act requires that these survivors have access to legal services and the Legal Services Corporation is a critical component of the current framework in place to ensure that this mandate is satisfied. We strongly urge you to support the continuation of this very important piece of our great Nation’s disaster response framework.

Sincerely,

All Hands Volunteers
Church World Service
Episcopal Relief & Development
Headwaters Relief Organization
ICNA Relief
Mennonite Disaster Service
Nechama
UMCOR
World Renew Disaster Response