

Funding Is Vital for Legal Aid Organizations' Functioning

Continued Legal Services Corporation funding for legal aid organizations is crucial for Wisconsin residents and the communities where they live.

BY DEEDEE D. PETERSON

Funding from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is the foundation of our nation's civil justice system – and once again, it is under threat.

LSC funding is the single largest building block of Wisconsin's legal help system. It forms the backbone of our work helping everyday Wisconsinites solve civil legal problems. It keeps our doors open, leverages other funding, and allows us to support volunteer attorneys. Any loss of LSC funding would weaken an already fragile system.

In 2024, LSC funding allowed Judicare Legal Aid and Legal Action of Wisconsin to handle 13,162 cases, helping people who were most in need and most at risk of going without legal help. The impact reaches even further – each client touches family members and communities who also feel the effects of a resolved legal problem. That's why, for every \$1 invested in legal aid, \$8.40 is returned to communities in Wisconsin.

Without LSC support, we would have to turn away more than 61,606 people every year. Legal aid organizations like ours help survivors of domestic violence, veterans, and older adults. These are everyday Wisconsinites who need legal help – often through no fault of their own – but cannot afford it.

The ripple effects are real. LSC funding is the difference between safety and danger, having a roof overhead and going without shelter, and health and illness.

People with household incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level are eligible for LSC-funded assistance – roughly 13.5% of Wisconsinites. Even with the \$7.5 million plus in LSC funding that Wisconsin received this year, we estimate that we turn away about

half of the people who could use our help – not because their problems aren't serious but because resources are limited.

That's why we speak up and raise awareness: because the need does not go away. Yet the White House has proposed eliminating LSC funding entirely.

About 30% of Judicare's and Legal Action's funding comes from the LSC. This support is critical for helping Wisconsinites navigate our complex civil legal system. The most common issues we handle involve domestic violence, housing instability, and benefits such as food assistance, disability, and health insurance. For many clients, legal aid is the *only* way to access justice. Without it, they are left to face the system alone.

Wisconsinites feel positive effects of LSC funding every day, and they will feel negative effects if Congress cuts it. Cuts would mean fewer staff, fewer services, and fewer clinics in communities and courthouses.

LSC funding is more than a line in a budget. It is the quiet force that keeps justice within reach for people with nowhere else to turn. It keeps our offices open, our phones answered, and our communities stronger. When LSC funding is threatened, not only programs are at risk – our neighbors and family members are, too. Justice cannot depend on income, and LSC makes sure it doesn't. That's why we will keep speaking and showing up, fighting for the funding that helps keep justice alive in Wisconsin. **WL**



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