

Women's Organizations Support the Legal Services Corporation

July 21, 2017

The Honorable John Culberson
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, Science & Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
2372 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, Science & Related Agencies
United States Senate
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen:

We are some of our nation's leading women's organizations, and we strongly commend to your attention the benefits that the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) provides to American women. Please restore LSC funding, which has suffered over the better part of the past decade.

Each year, legal aid programs funded through LSC assist nearly 2 million people in households with critical legal needs.

Women constitute 70% of the people assisted through the Legal Services Corporation—well over a million women each year—and family cases, such as domestic abuse, divorce/separation/annulment, and child custody issues make up the largest number of cases supported by LSC attorneys. LSC is currently the primary source of legal assistance for survivors of domestic violence.

Our organizations seek to remove barriers for women, such as barriers to education, to employment, to benefits, to housing, to personal safety, to familial security, to financial well-being, and to healthcare. In precisely these areas, legal aid attorneys labor to secure women's rights.

A cut to the Legal Services Corporation is a cut to attorney access for women and a consequent cut to equal access to justice and safety for women. Unfortunately, since Fiscal Year 2010 (inflation adjusted), LSC's current FY 2017 funding has been cut 19.1%.

If the House level for LSC funding were to prevail for a final FY 2018 appropriation, LSC would suffer a 37% cut since 2010 (inflation adjusted). States and localities simply cannot bridge this shortfall. At that level, hundreds of thousands fewer women would be served nationwide. Women deserve better.

The burden of these cuts has been felt by the states and localities, which are not equipped to shoulder the federal share.

This year, the Administration's FY 2018 budget proposes to eliminate LSC and thus to shirk all federal responsibility for equal justice under law. It evinces an understanding that states and localities would shoulder the burden, understating, "This proposed elimination puts more control in the hands of State and local governments which better understand the needs of their communities." The wording would almost make one think that cutting off funding is a favor to states and localities.

Last year, the FY 2017 House Budget Resolution precisely envisioned an unfunded mandate on states and localities to shoulder the *entire* burden, "Eliminate the Legal Services Corporation. It is the duty of State and local governments to provide legal services to those individuals unable to provide it for themselves."

We understand that LSC plays a critical role in improving the operation of our judicial system, which can otherwise clog with delays and complications associated with unrepresented parties.

Furthermore, LSC funding effectively benefits commerce and communities, as over 30 cost-benefit studies have demonstrated over the past decade.

We applaud LSC as a paradigm of successful public-private partnerships, with federal funds leveraging three times as much from nonfederal sources.

We appreciate that LSC serves as the backbone for pro bono programs nationally and that without sufficient LSC funding those pro bono programs would not operate effectively. In 2015, pro bono programs resolved 10.2 % of legal aid cases. While vital, this pro bono work can never replace LSC funding for civil legal services.

In June of 2017, the Legal Services Corporation released a University of Chicago study of America's "justice gap"—the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and the resources available to meet them. In the past year, 71% of low-income families experienced at least one civil legal problem. However, 86% of those problems received inadequate or no legal help.

The gap between our national pledge of justice for all and the reality on the ground is large. While we understand that the allocation for the House Commerce, Justice, Science appropriations bill is 4.6% less this year than last, the bill proposes a disproportionately large 24% cut for LSC's basic field grants. Please do not balance the budget on the backs of women. We urge you not to cut funding for the Legal Services Corporation, but instead, for the women whom LSC serves, to restore LSC funding.

Sincerely,



9to5
National Association of Working Women



American Medical Women's Association
The Voice of Women in Medicine since 1915
American Medical Women's Association



Atlanta Women for Equality



A Better Balance



Women Employed
Women Employed



YWCA USA



National Organization for Women



Southwest Women's Law Center



Women's Law Project



National Women's Law Center