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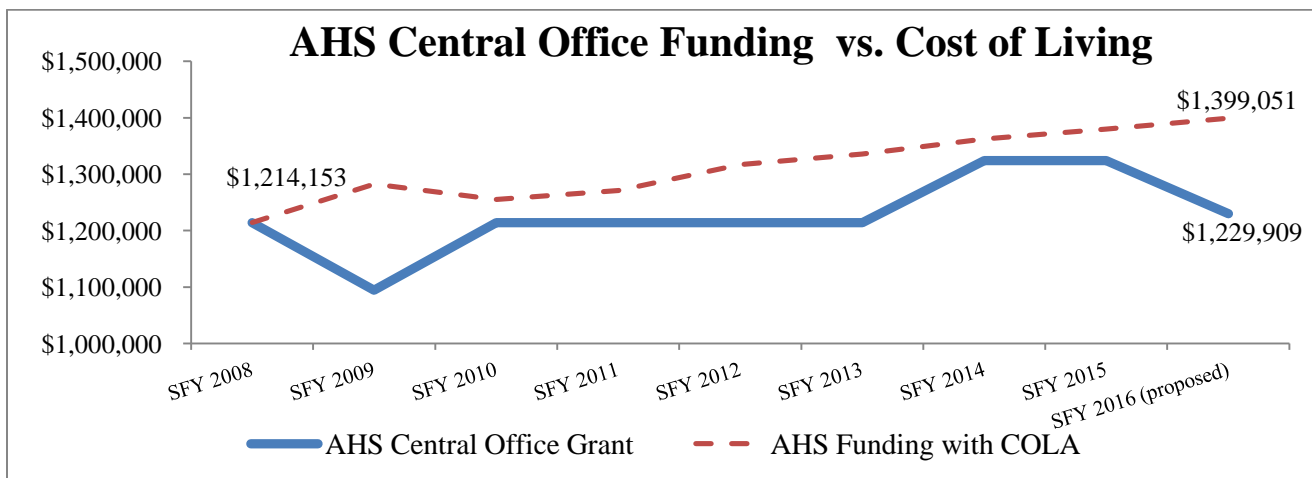
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Legal Aid Faces Proposed Cut of \$47,000

The Administration is proposing to reduce its Agency of Human Services (AHS) Central Office funding of Vermont Legal Aid (VLA) by **\$47,000** in General Fund dollars. This will result in AHS general funding for Legal Aid shrinking almost to the level it was in 2008. The unfortunate reality is that AHS does not see its role as insuring there is access to legal services for low-income Vermonters. The Agency has proposed just two increases in the past 20 years. Each year, or every other year, the Agency proposes to reduce the Legal Aid grant and the issue is debated in the Legislature. Once every 7 years or so, the Legislature directs the Agency to increase Legal Aid's grant. Although many desperately needed programs are being cut this year, most of them are not being cut back to 2008 levels. I am hoping the Senate will consider reducing or eliminating this proposed cut.



Legal Aid has received funding from the Central Office (Secretary's Office) of AHS for more than 30 years. It supports two major areas of legal services, at approximately the same levels:

Right to Counsel cases in which the state is required, by statute, to provide lawyers in certain kinds of cases—primarily mental health commitment and medication cases, as well as certain state guardianship and other proceedings for disabled clients; and,

General Civil Legal Services to the Poor cases where Legal Aid helps low-income clients solve a range of critical civil legal problems.

Work on the first group of cases has increased significantly since the abandonment of the State Hospital after Irene, as the patients are now located in many places across the state. It was much more efficient for both the Mental Health Law Project (MHLP) and the state's doctors and lawyers to handle most of these cases when everybody participating was in Waterbury. For example, travel and medical records copying charges have more than doubled. In addition, the number of commitment-related cases has increased by over **15% in the past three years** and the disability-related guardianship caseload has increased by **36%**.

At the same time, requests for help with general civil legal problems have also increased. Over the past seven years, the number of low-income Vermonters calling Legal Aid for help has gone from less than 11,000 in 2008 to over 13,000 last year, a 20% increase.

Vermont Legal Aid is facing two compounding challenges. It must surmount the difficulties and inefficiencies caused by the closing of the State Hospital, while at the same time handling a significantly increased demand for services from low-income Vermonters. Because Legal Aid is required to accept the cases that are assigned by the court, any decrease in overall funding will result in our turning away an ever-larger number of low-income clients with critical legal needs.

As the Legislature considers the SFY 2016 budget, it is important to remember that intervention by VLA often results in saving state dollars in both the short and long-term, and supports key Agency goals. In the vast majority of cases, our clients are in a better social and financial condition at the end of the case than when they first sought help.

- ✓ These clients, who are all receiving, or are eligible for, AHS services will generally need fewer AHS services and less financial support than they would have if they had not received help from VLA.
- ✓ Legal Aid helps domestic violence victims protect themselves and their children, maintain their housing, and receive adequate child support.
- ✓ Legal Aid helps disabled Vermonters get federal disability benefits that will help insure they will not need to rely on state benefit programs for years into the future.
- ✓ Legal Aid helps Vermonters keep their homes in the face of unlawful or unauthorized mortgage foreclosures brought by out-of-state banks and loan servicers.

Most Vermonters only come to VLA when they face a crisis—losing their only income, losing their home, afraid for their children's safety, facing a desperate health care choice, or losing their individual liberty. We are there at the end of the line, often after all the other agencies and organizations have tried to help. Legal Aid lawyers are sometimes the only ones that can keep a family in their home or safe from their abuser; and, it is help in these kinds of cases that prevents a family's downward spiral into poverty and despair. This is a program that solves problems and ultimately saves the state money.