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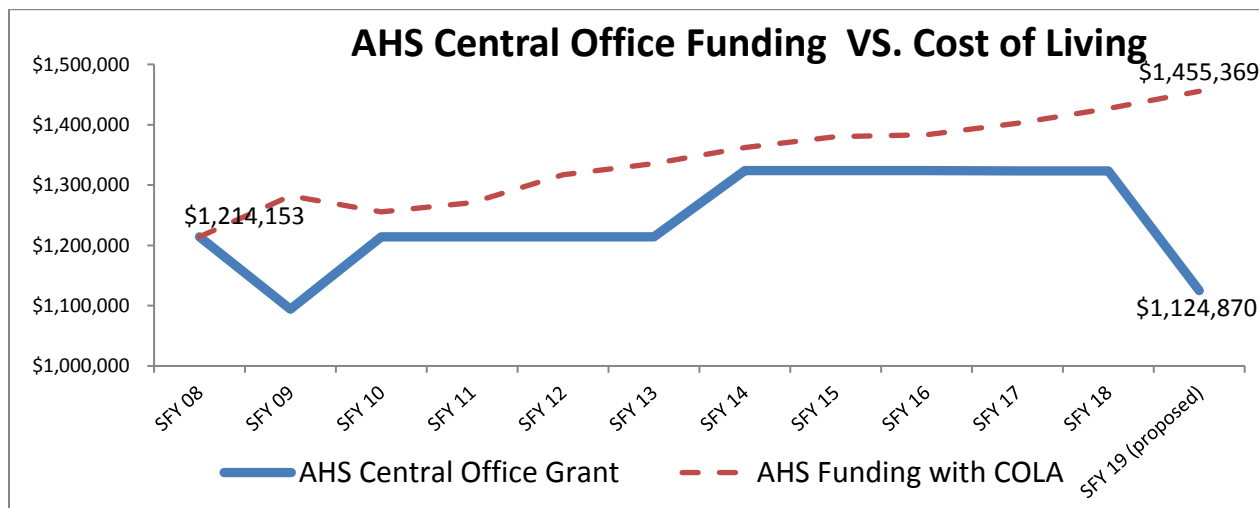
MONTPELIER
SPRINGFIELD

Legal Aid Faces Proposed Cut of \$200,000!

The Administration is, once again, proposing to reduce its Agency of Human Services (AHS) Central Office funding of Vermont Legal Aid (VLA), this year by **\$198,624** (only a \$71,468 “savings” in General Fund dollars, but a cut of \$198,624 in services). This would result in shrinking AHS general funding for Legal Aid below the level it was ten years ago!

AHS has cited decreasing caseloads as the rationale for cutting Legal Aid funding. While there may have been a decline in other AHS caseloads, there has not been a decline in the number of mental health and guardianship cases in which the State appoints Legal Aid. In addition, requests for help from Legal Aid have increased in the last two years by **15%** (almost 2,000 additional calls). AHS does not request data showing the legal needs low-income Vermonters face and thus they are not reflecting the growing need for legal help or the full impact of Legal Aid’s work has on Vermont’s most vulnerable citizens.

Funding from AHS has remained flat for the past 5 years, and federal support has declined; as a result, Legal Aid has had to reduce staff and reduce the number of cases it accepts for full representation. However, it has increased the number of Vermonters it is helping through our legal hotline (Vermont Law Help) that ensures, at a minimum, that anyone calling VLA gets to *speak* with an attorney. Given the increased demand for help with critical legal problems, AHS should be increasing Legal Aid funding by \$300,000, not reducing its support.



Legal Aid has received funding from the Central Office (Secretary's Office) of AHS for more than 30 years. This funding 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 involuntary mental health commitment and medication cases, as well as certain state guardianship and other proceedings for clients with disabilities; and,

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

Work on the first group of cases increased significantly since the abandonment of the State Hospital in Waterbury after Tropical Storm Irene, as the patients are now dispersed throughout many places across the state. Travel and the costs for medical records have more than doubled over the same timeframe that the state funding for these cases has remained flat. At the same time, requests for help with general civil legal problems have also increased. Over the past 10 years, the number of low-income Vermonters calling Legal Aid for help has gone from less than 10,000 in 2008 to over 15,000 last year, a 50% increase.

The proposed cut to Vermont Legal Aid's AHS contract would result in a dramatic reduction in legal help to Vermont's most vulnerable residents. Since Legal Aid is mandated to accept the mental health and protective services cases that are assigned to it by the court, **100% of the proposed \$200,000 cut will come out of its poverty law work, reducing the number of poverty lawyers funded by AHS from six to four – a reduction of 30%.**

The Governor has promised to "*protect Vermont's most vulnerable people.*" Cutting critical Legal Aid services to those vulnerable citizens is, in fact, doing just the opposite. In the vast majority of cases, our clients are in a better social and financial condition at the end of their 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 and maintain their housing.
- ✓ Legal Aid helps Vermonters with disabilities get federal disability benefits that will help ensure 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; in the end, assistance in these kinds of cases prevents a family's downward spiral into poverty and despair.

We ask the Legislature to restore at least level funding to the Legal Aid contract to help safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable Vermonters.