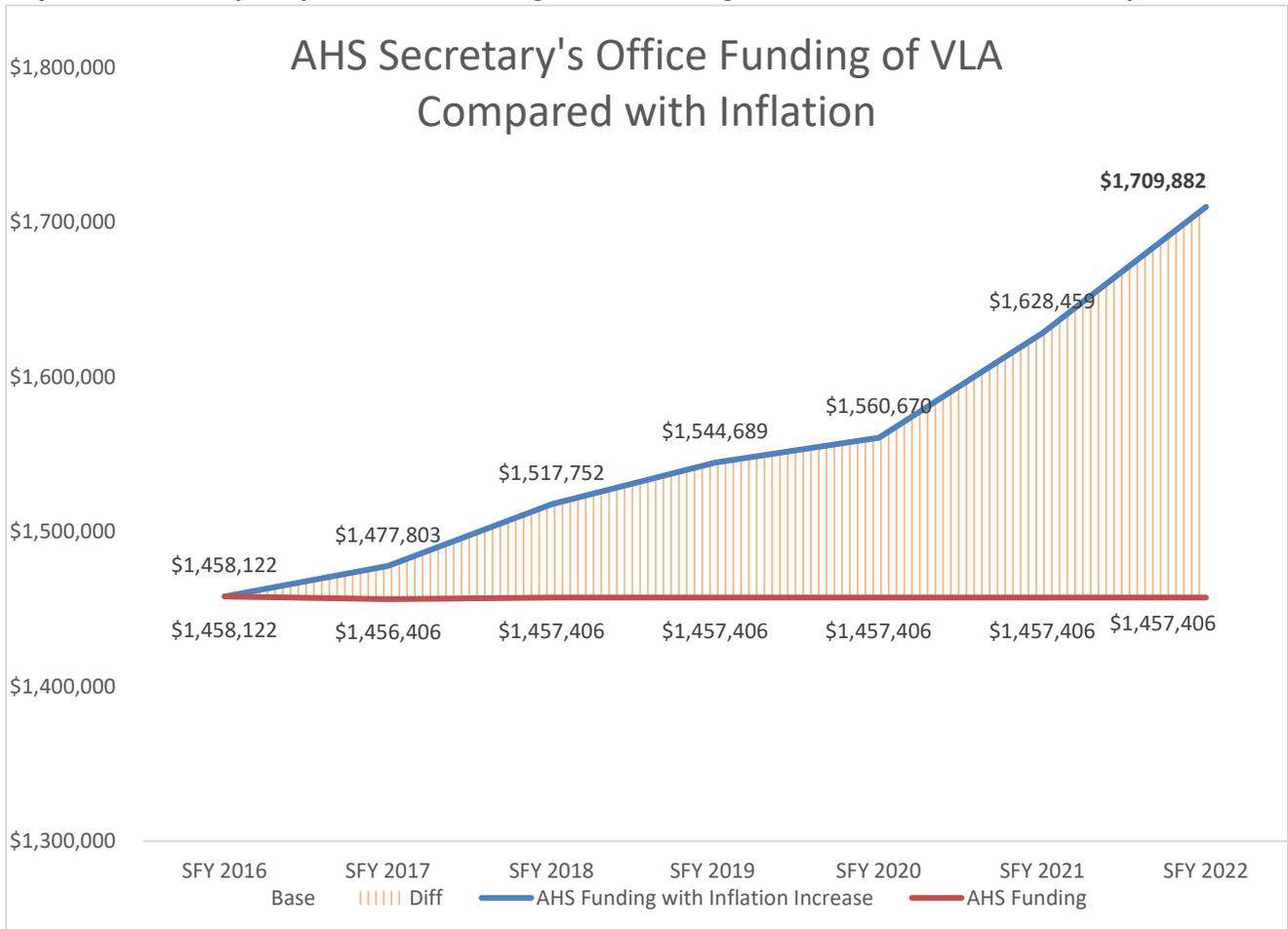




Civil legal aid is an essential part of Vermont’s social safety net, protecting the basic rights of low-income and vulnerable individuals and families as they face critical legal problems related to housing, domestic violence, health care, and access to services and income. Civil legal aid brings economic benefits to individual clients, private business, and the state. With 20% of all Vermonters eligible our services, it is vitally important to ensure that the State of Vermont adequately funds Vermont Legal Aid (VLA).

The State of Vermont funds this work at VLA through a grant from the Agency of Human Services, which funds representation for people facing mental health commitment and for low-income Vermonters with civil legal problems. The last increase in funding for general legal services for low-income clients was in SFY 2016, 6 years ago.¹ Had this grant been adjusted, even by only the cost of living, our annual grant would have increased by \$250,000.



¹ There was an increase in funding to represent people in criminal commitment cases last year, but none of those dollars can be used to help people with regular civil legal problems.

At the same time the state has been level-funding VLA, the number of Vermonters calling us for help has increased significantly. VLA and our partner, Legal Services Vermont, responded to more than 18,000 calls and requests for help on the web last year, an average of almost 100 calls for help each business day. This represents an increase of more than 35% over the number of requests in 2016. We try to provide each caller with the opportunity to speak with an attorney or paralegal to describe their problem(s) and at least some assistance in that initial contact.

VLA has received funding from the Secretary's Office of AHS for almost 50 years. This funding supports two major areas of legal services:

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

General Civil Legal Services cases where VLA helps low-income clients solve critical civil legal problems.

Work on the first group of cases has increased since the abandonment of the State Hospital in Waterbury after Tropical Storm Irene, as well as a result of the recent transfer of responsibility for providing representation in criminal commitment cases to Legal Aid. The state recognized the impact of the increased workload and increased funding for our commitment work. However, the state has not made a comparable investment in funding for general legal services to low-income Vermonters.

Vermont Legal Aid has received several stimulus-funded grants and contracts from the state to help it respond to legal problems related to the pandemic, particularly those involving housing. However, those programs are time-limited and targeted at handling narrow groups of legal problems. Legal Aid cannot use those funds to help respond to the increasing numbers of cases in other areas. For example, VLA handled less than 33 Unemployment Insurance cases in 2016 but had to respond to more than 400 last year; we had 380 calls about domestic violence in 2016, and over 550 last year. The lack of general state support for Legal Aid is significantly limiting our ability to respond to the increasing number of critical legal problems facing our most vulnerable neighbors.

In the vast majority of cases where VLA gets involved, our clients are in a better social and financial condition at the end of their cases than when they first sought help.

We ask that the House consider making a modest investment of \$250,000 in general funds to restore state support of VLA to where it was in 2016 and help maintain critical services to low-income and disadvantaged Vermonters.

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