

Comments of Rachel Seelig, Esq.
Vermont Legal Aid, Inc.
Joint Hearing of House & Senate Committees on Appropriations
February 21, 2023

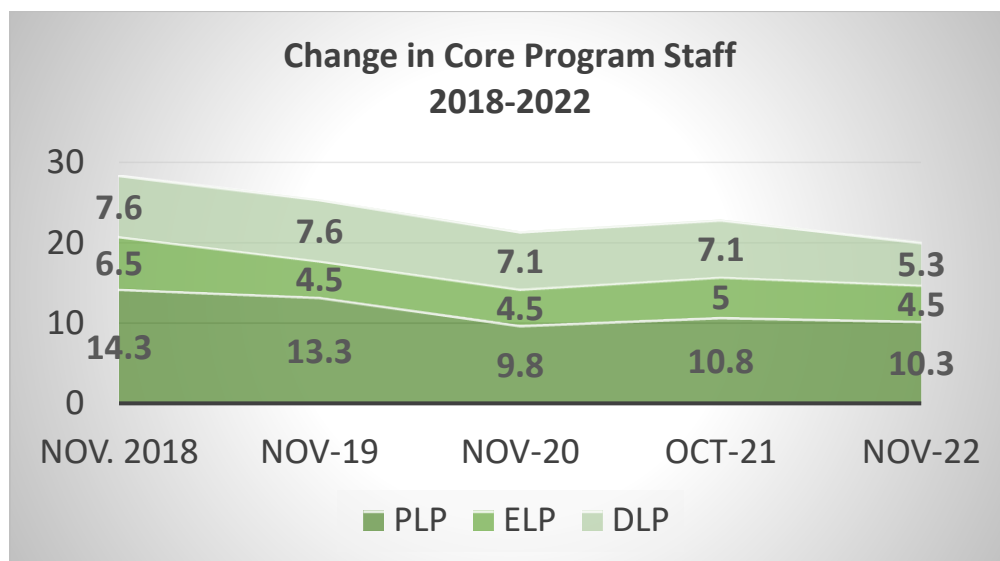
Madam Chairs and Members of the Committees:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the needs of Vermont Legal Aid's state appropriation this afternoon. My name is Rachel Seelig. I am here today on behalf of Vermont Legal Aid.

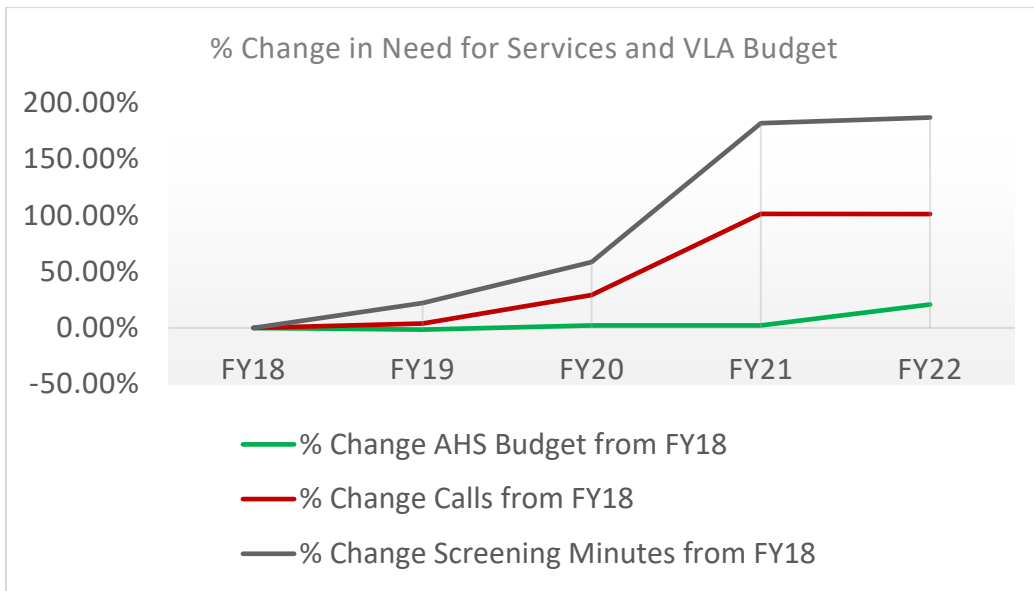
We are a statewide nonprofit legal services provider. With our sister organization, Legal Services Vermont, we respond to over 26,000 requests for legal assistance each year, helping Vermonters with legal issues involving benefits, housing, education, employment, civil and individual rights, health, and assistance to crime victims.

The governor's recommendation is to provide level funding to Vermont Legal Aid this fiscal year. Three factors bring me here to ask that you increase our base funding by \$1,310,000 and incorporate a COLA in our budget moving forward.

- (1) Over the past four years, our Poverty, Elder and Disability Law Projects have seen almost a 30% reduction in staff, which translates to around 16,000 fewer hours available to serve clients.



At the same time, the number of Vermonters seeking our help has more than doubled. In FY18 and 19, our intake line fielded around 13,000 calls to over 26,000 calls a year for the last two years. This impacts service delivery. Except for emergencies like an illegal lockout, it takes 7-10 days to call clients back. This is too long, and we need your help to address this volume, with \$360,000 to add 3 staff to our team.



(2) Our costs have increased significantly over the past year, more than the increase we received last year. Increased health care costs, staff salary at a COLA less than the actual increased in cost of living, and other expenses are costing us \$500,000.

- a. An 11.6% increase in health insurance - \$130,000.
- b. Staff salary increases at a COLA that was less than the actual increase in cost of living were up 8.6% - \$300,000.
- c. Other expenses saw approximately a 5% increase - \$70,000.

(3) Strong headwinds indicate need for our services is about to increase even further, with pandemic programs ending, and consumer debt rising. We anticipate an even greater demand for legal services to fight the injustice of poverty.

Once through the door, we need \$450,00 to fund 3.5 staff on an ongoing basis.

In sum, this is \$1,310,000. Currently, our appropriation is about \$2.3 million, of which, \$1,923,494 is for general legal services (the rest is for Mental Health Law Project specific expenses). Funding this request would increase our legal services budget to \$3,233,494.

How AHS Funds Are Used:

- Poverty Law Project – 41.4%
- Mental Health Law Project – 32.8%
- Disability Law Project – 10.2%
 - Act 248 & Guardianships – 5%
 - Other – 5.2%
- Elder Law Project – 7.6%
- All other VLA Projects – 8%

This is a sound investment. [A study commissioned in 2019](#) found that for every dollar you invest in civil legal services, Vermont sees an \$11 return. Increasing our budget would benefit Vermonters and the State of Vermont to the tune of \$14 million dollars in income to low-income households, reduced costs to the state of Vermont, and a multiplier impact on communities.

Thank you, for your time and consideration. Please include a base fund appropriation increase of \$1,310,000 and incorporate a COLA into VLA's appropriation moving forward.