



Vermont Legal Aid
Testimony in House Human Services
January 8, 2026

Good Morning, my name is Bessie Weiss and I am the interim executive director of Vermont Legal Aid. Thank you for giving me this time.

Along with our partner, Legal Services Vermont, we provide the core infrastructure for Vermont's civil legal assistance efforts. We offer free legal advice and representation to low-income Vermonters from 4 offices located across the state. We also operate a legal helpline providing quick legal advice, information, and referral; and we maintain a website focused on helping Vermonters solve their legal problems themselves that gets over 600,000 hits per year.

Our services have a very large impact. Together **we field 26,000 requests for legal assistance annually**. In **2025 we directly assisted 18,000 Vermonters**. We provide full representation in approximately **2600 to 3000 cases per year**.

Despite the overwhelming need for legal services, this will be our third straight year that we have not received an increase in our appropriation from the Agency of Human Services. Level funding is hitting us especially hard in SFY2026 because of significant federal funding cuts and increases to health insurance premiums.

In SFY2025 Vermont Legal Aid lost \$4,526,000 dollars in federal funding (\$1,275,000 funds from HUD that for 19 years funded our Housing Discrimination Project, and \$3,251,000 funds from ERAP that funded



our Housing for Everyone Project). This has meant the painful loss of a total of 11 staff – 9 attorneys and 2 paralegals.

That's why we are here and why we are asking for an increase in the SFY2026 appropriation. This increase would compensate us for inflation and restore 2 staff attorney positions in our Poverty Law Project and provide more funding for our Helpline.

The Poverty Law Project provides general legal services and is being squeezed, as a greater percentage of our appropriation goes to mandatory legal services such as involuntary mental health treatment cases, protective services, and Act 248 cases. Specifically, we are asking for \$535,620 that amount will compensate for inflation and fund the 2 staff attorney positions.

Our statewide helpline fields 26,000 calls. It provides VLA with many of our case referrals and provides some level of direct assistance to 18,000 Vermonters - but it is significantly underfunded. LSV receives just \$100,000 through our AHS appropriation. The total operating cost is over \$900,000. Due to the reduction in staff, we have already needed to restrict the types of calls that receive a call back and the call back time for non-urgent calls has increased to almost two weeks. Without additional funds those services will likely be further reduced. That is why we are asking for an additional \$100,000 for the statewide Helpline.

Increasing funding for the Poverty Law Project and the Legal Helpline is a good investment in two ways. The first is that for every dollar spent on general legal services – (access to public benefits – food, energy assistance – social security disability, and housing) – the Agency of Human Services gets 50 cents back in federal matching funds. The



second is that a 2019 study commissioned by the Vermont Bar Foundation found that legal assistance programs generate \$11 dollars in economic activity for each dollar invested in Vermont Legal Aid and other legal assistance providers.

Finally, the outlook for future federal funding is bleak. Despite having once again been awarded HUD grants for housing discrimination in September, HUD has yet to begin formal negotiations for us to receive these funds. And an application we submitted in August to the Office for Victims of Crime for funds that are available to represent elders in abuse and neglect cases has yet to receive a response.

We understand that you are facing unprecedented challenges this session and we appreciate the funding we receive year to year through the state and with your help.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with the committee this morning. I am happy to answer any questions.