






PROGRAM DIRECTORS:

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Jessie Nicholson | Southern MN Regional Legal Services 

March 15, 2021

SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY

Chair Jamie Becker-Finn
559 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

RE: The Role of Civil Legal Services in the Efficiency of the Legal System in Minnesota

Dear Chair Becker-Finn:

We write as the executive leaders of the civil legal aid law firms that comprise the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition (“the Coalition”).¹ We represent families and individuals in every county in Minnesota, protecting their most basic civil legal rights and needs. We write this letter to provide information both about [1] the current high level of demand we are experiencing for our skilled legal representation services, and [2] the results of our work to screen cases at the intake phase of seeking justice for Minnesotans in meritorious cases.

We are forced to turn away over half of people who come to us for legal help due to lack of resources. Additionally, we navigate heavy demand for legal help in cases that are without merit or not within our legal work priorities.

To illustrate the value of our skilled intake screening in handling all of these requests for help, the Coalition analyzed call volume and case opening data from the Fourth Quarter of 2020. Our data indicates that our intake teams fielded 33,169 phone calls from October through December 2020. During that time, we opened 6,533 legal cases.

In over 80% of the calls we received (26,635 of 33,169), we were able to assess that the case was not within our capacity or priorities, or otherwise was not a legal problem warranting the use of our limited resources. So, even at the intake stage of delivering justice to Minnesotans, we are carefully screening cases to ensure that our valuable services are targeted at meritorious, priority cases, and often directing callers to a variety of non-legal resources to support them in resolving their problems. In this process, we make effective referrals to other agencies, advocates, service

¹ The Coalition we lead includes seven regional civil legal aid organizations – Anishinabe Legal Services (ALS), Central Minnesota Legal Services (CMLS), Judicare of Anoka County (JAC), Legal Aid Service of Northeastern Minnesota (LASNEM), Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota (LSNM), Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid (MMLA), and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS).

providers, and other resources in the communities we serve, helping people resolve problems while targeting our legal representation services to priority cases.

Former Chief Justice Eric Magnuson wrote the following about Civil Legal Services in his letter of support for our funding request:

Each dollar spent on legal aid not only provides a multiplied direct benefit, but the work of civil legal aid lawyers, both full-time and volunteer, helps our justice system function more efficiently. Pro se litigants, struggling to present their issues to the courts without legal assistance, dramatically slow down the judicial process as judges have to take significantly more time in processing their cases to ensure that the rights of all of the involved litigants are protected. Not only do civil legal service lawyers make that process more efficient, but in a large numbers of instances, civil legal service lawyers are able to explain to potential litigants the legal process and likely outcomes and facilitate resolution of disputes that never need to see the courtroom.

Thank you, again, for your consideration of our funding request in this time of crisis for Civil Legal Services statewide. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

/s/ Minnesota Legal Services Coalition

Anne Hoefgen, Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota
Jean Lastine, Central Minnesota Legal Services
Cody Nelson, Anishinabe Legal Services
Jessie Nicholson, Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services
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