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**Cody Nelson** | Anishinabe Legal Services 


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**Anne Hoefgen** | Legal Services of Northwest MN 

**Danielle Walczak** | Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid

**Jessie Nicholson** | Southern MN Regional Legal Services 

April 4, 2022

Dear Chair Becker-Finn and Republican Lead Scott:

On behalf of Civil Legal Services (CLS), thank you for the opportunity to provide information to support CLS supplemental change item requests, as well as our gratitude for Bill HF3920.

CLS is a critical part of the three-legged stool that comprises the justice system, along with the Courts and criminal justice partners. CLS provides free legal services to approximately 92,000 Minnesotans in all 87 counties every year. These legal services ensure access to basic needs to low-income Minnesota in matters of personal safety, homelessness prevention, and economic stability for vulnerable communities.

CLS is experiencing a staffing crisis. In 2021, CLS had a staff turnover rate of 37%. In addition, CLS attorneys are the lowest paid attorneys in the public and non-profit sectors. We are grateful for the progress we made last session, unfortunately, as seen by our turnover rate, it was not enough to sustain our staffing. It brought staff attorneys from a starting salary of \$50,000 on average to an average of \$55,000. As of July 1, CLS will be starting staff attorneys at nearly \$15,000 less than the public defenders and average county attorney salaries.

Unfortunately, due to limited resources, CLS is forced to turn away 55% of all eligible clients seeking legal help. When CLS is unable to serve individuals, they are lawyerless litigants in the justice system. The ripple effect is not only negative outcomes for these individuals, but the multitude of inefficiencies experienced by the Courts.

CLS has two current funding requests. One for \$4,304,000 to be added to the base to address the salary crisis created by years of underfunding. With this increase, our allocation for FY 2023 would be \$22,502,000.

The second request is for three years of funding for emergency staffing and technology for pandemic response. Additional emergency staff are needed to protect the critical needs of at-risk communities and ensure equal access to justice and provide technological access to virtual court proceedings for all Minnesotans. The communities served by CLS have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. CLS is seeing a tremendous increase in need in a variety of areas including homelessness prevention, domestic violence, educational access and needs neglected during the pandemic. CLS has been a leader of bridging the digital divide for low-income Minnesotans as the justice system has moved virtual.

The first year of funding of \$7.463 million will allow CLS to hire 75 FTE and a one-time investment to expand and support the technological infrastructure. The next two years will continue the emergency staffing and virtual technological support.

The current state appropriation supports a CLS structure of approximately 499.25 FTE. This allows us to help only 45% of the eligible Minnesotans that apply for services. An additional \$84.2 million would allow CLS to fully serve all qualified applicants with approximately 1,270 FTE. We are incredibly grateful that this committee and the legislature are finally having the conversation about what is necessary to have a balanced and stable three-legged justice system stool, where access to civil legal services to secure basic human needs is a right and not a privilege for all low-income Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

**/s/ Minnesota Legal Services Coalition**

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