



BOARD OF CONTRIBUTORS 'Defenseless and oppressed' will be hit hardest

Legal services funding cuts would slash access to justice

Commentary by Lance A. Harke

"I will never reject, from any consideration personal to myself, the cause of the defenseless or oppressed. ... So help me God."

Thus ends the Oath of Admission to The Florida Bar, which every attorney in Florida must swear to uphold. Yet the U.S. House of Representatives has proposed to drastically cut funding to the Legal Services Corporation (LSC),



Harke

an umbrella non-profit group that provides funding to 136 legal services programs on the state level, including Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. (LSGMI) — the largest provider of civil

legal services in South Florida. LSGMI provides high-quality legal services directly to the "defenseless or oppressed," helping more than 30,000 clients each year find solutions to the daunting legal challenges confronting the poor, including mortgage foreclosures, evictions, disability benefits, unemployment compensation, education for children with special needs and consumer fraud and abuse.

The proposed LSC cuts go directly to core American values — equal access to justice and equal justice under the law



— as well as our core identities as lawyers. Congress already cut funding in the spring by \$15.8 million, or 4 percent of the overall budget. But the House wants to slash another \$104 million for fiscal 2012, reducing levels to \$300 million — something last seen when Bill Clinton was president.

Combined with major reductions in IOTA funding, the proposed LSC cuts could not be more ill-timed. Last year 63 million people qualified for free legal assistance, an all-time high and an increase of more than 11 percent from the prior year. Here in South Florida, the impact would be severe: LSGMI would lose over \$1 million in vitally needed funds and would have to reduce its legal staff by a further 15 percent. This would mean more than 10,000 "defenseless or oppressed" fellow South Floridians would have to face the banks, landlords, government agencies and large corporations all by themselves — and you can rest assured these entities will be well represented by very competent counsel.

It's important to note that legal service programs like LSGMI have a "preventive effect" that actually saves money in the long term. Housing a family in a

homeless shelter costs far more than supporting an attorney who can keep that family and dozens of others in their homes. Not only that, but dollars spent on LSGMI services are good for our local economy, generating \$4.78 of economic impact for every \$1 spent on legal services.

Though things look bleak, it's not too late — contact your Congressional representatives and U.S. Sens. Marco Rubio and Bill Nelson and demand that programs like LSGMI retain their funding so that those at or near the poverty line can continue to receive high-quality legal representation. And get involved with LSGMI's "Together, We Must" Campaign for Justice, which has already raised substantial funds through the generosity of so many leaders in the South Florida legal community.

As Americans grapple with joblessness, a deepening recession, Wall Street misdeeds and a wealth disparity that grows greater every day, it's important to honor our responsibilities to support those less fortunate than ourselves. As lawyers that means ensuring that programs like LSGMI can continue to provide what our Pledge of Allegiance proclaims — "justice for all" — and what our Oath of Admission specifically requires.

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