



NEW JERSEY STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

THOMAS HOFF PROL, PRESIDENT
Laddey Clark & Ryan, LLP
60 Blue Heron Road, Suite 300
Sparta, NJ 07871-2608
973-729-1880 • FAX: 973-729-1224
tprol@lclaw.com

STATEMENT OF
THE NEW JERSEY STATE BAR ASSOCIATION
TO THE SENATE BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

Presented by:

Thomas H. Prol
NJSBA President

April 13, 2017

Good afternoon Chairman Sarlo, members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about an issue of great importance to the legal community and to our underserved residents in need of legal services.

I am Thomas H. Prol, president of the New Jersey State Bar Association.

The New Jersey State Bar Association is deeply concerned about the proposal to cut \$5 million in funding for New Jersey Legal Services from the state's budget.

Our government was founded on the concept of justice for all, and the state government has a critical role in providing justice for all. New Jersey Legal Services provides vital legal aid to a wide range of residents in our state – over 120,000 alone last year.

In New Jersey, Legal Services has just completed its 50th year of proud service, providing representation in well over 2.4 million cases and helping more than 7 million clients. Sadly, poverty in New Jersey remains at 50-year record levels, nearly a decade after the declared end of the Great Recession. More people need LSNJ's help for their overwhelming legal problems – which are quite literally life and death matters – than any time since the beginning of the 1960s.

The proposed cut of \$5 million from LSNJ's budget would be devastating. It cannot sustain another reduction. The justice gap among New Jersey's neediest families is already yawning and threatens to be an uncrossable chasm. And this comes at a time when funding for Legal Services Corporation, the federal organization that provides critical financial support to agencies including LSNJ, is on the chopping block in Washington and could be eliminated altogether.

Legal Services provides free legal aid in civil legal matters to the state's poorest, most vulnerable residents. Now more than ever, these people need these services. There is no constitutional right to counsel in civil legal matters, so when those living in desperate poverty are facing adversity in their weakest state, LSNJ provides their most important resource. That means keeping families together and avoiding homelessness by fighting illegal evictions; maintaining senior couples in their homes in the face of imminent foreclosures based on predatory lending practices; protecting victims of domestic violence; helping recent graduates and their families deal with the crushing burden of unfair student debt; helping low income families combat unscrupulous practices of slick commercial entities and lenders; and, making sure those entitled to assistance from government programs designed to assist the state's most vulnerable people actually receive the help they need.

We know the value of LSNJ first-hand. Lawyers who are members of the association provide countless hours of pro bono legal services to individuals in desperate need of assistance. In fact, we co-hosted an event in Union City with over two dozen volunteer attorneys and the turnout was overwhelming. Over 150 Union City residents showed up to speak to our volunteers and many more were given contact information because time had simply run out. There is clearly a need, but without funding to supplement these volunteers who, despite mounting obligations, commit pro bono hours to help these constituents, those people will continue to be turned away.

Our members' volunteer service is dependent on partnership with the local legal aid organization, which screens cases for merit and eligibility, and trains and mentors our attorneys. Reducing funding for LSNJ will not only imperil the ability of civil legal aid organizations to serve New Jersey residents in need, it will also vastly diminish the private bar's capacity to help these individuals. The pro bono activity facilitated by critical legal aid funding is exactly the kind of public-private partnership the government should encourage, not eliminate.

The NJSBA urges you to provide robust funding for LSNJ.

I thank you for your time and attention to this very important matter.