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Guest columnist

Serve justice by protecting civil legal aid for low-income people

Federal funding for legal aid for low-income people is being cut dramatically. Guest columnists John G. Levi and Harry J.F. Korrell argue that this important funding must be protected to ensure low-income people have access to justice in the court system.

By [John G. Levi](#) and [Harry J.F. Korrell](#)
Special to The Times

FUNDING for civil legal aid to low-income people here and throughout the country is in jeopardy.

A proposal before the U.S. House of Representatives would cut funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) by 26 percent — a reduction of \$104 million to its already-reduced budget of \$404 million. The proposal, for fiscal year 2012, would roll back funding to a level not seen since 1999. Funding for the program in Washington state, the Northwest Justice Project, would be cut by more than \$1.5 million a year.



Across the nation, hundreds of thousands more Americans who are eligible for legal services would have to be turned away as local nonprofit legal-aid programs are forced to reduce staffing and lay off attorneys. The timing could not be worse. The poverty population eligible for such legal assistance has grown by 17 percent since 2008, to an all-time high of 63 million. In Washington, nearly a quarter of the population is eligible for civil legal assistance.

At the Northwest Justice Project, there are pleas from women trying to escape domestic violence and protect their children. There are requests for help from elderly people deceived by scam artists. Families who are desperate call, worried about losing the roof over their heads because of foreclosure or eviction. Often callers are seeking unemployment benefits, or feel financially overwhelmed and see bankruptcy as the only path to a fresh start.

Given the fiscal pressures facing our nation, why should taxpayers care about legal-aid funding? Civil legal assistance is necessary to provide access to justice, which has long been a part of our national fabric. We pledge allegiance to a nation "with justice for all," period. We do not ration justice based on ability to pay.

Here and throughout the country, civil legal assistance supports the orderly functioning of the civil-justice system and access to administrative agencies throughout government. Large numbers of unrepresented parties in courts slow dockets and reduce efficiency in the administration of justice for everyone who needs to use the court system.

In many cases, civil legal assistance averts more costly interventions by state and local agencies. For low-income Americans, legal aid greatly improves their chances of keeping their homes rather than moving into a city or county shelter, and of escaping abusive relationships rather than suffering further injury or even death.

We understand that money alone is not the complete answer. The LSC board of directors has launched a *pro bono* task force to look for new ways to expand the number of volunteer lawyers working with its legal-aid programs. LSC is also focused on using technology to increase efficiency and to expand the availability of legal forms and information to the public.

But we all know that slashing LSC's budget by 26 percent will further greatly impair our ability to provide access to justice for low-income Americans. We urge Congress to step up and address this challenge. As Americans, we share a responsibility to keep the flames of equal justice alive.

John Levi of Chicago, left, is chairman of the Legal Services Corporation board. Harry Korrell of Seattle is an LSC Board member and co-chair of the board's Pro Bono Task Force.