

Legal Aid forced to lay off 750 workers in US

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The Legal Services Corporation (LSC), the nation's provider of civil legal assistance for the poor, announced on August 15, that funding cuts will leave it no choice this year but to lay off about 8 percent of its lawyers and support staff, close branch offices and narrow the types of services they provide.

Congressional cuts and funding losses will result in the layoff of 750 employees, including 350 attorneys. These cuts come at a time when demand for legal aid services has skyrocketed because of high unemployment.

The LSC was established as a non-profit corporation by Congress in 1974 and is funded by annual congressional appropriations. Its mandate is to provide "equal" access to justice and to ensure the delivery of high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income Americans. The corporation currently provides funding to 136 independent nonprofit legal aid programs in every state, the District of Columbia and US territories.

LSC grants help address the civil legal needs of the elderly, veterans, people on public assistance, victims of domestic violence, disabled individuals and others with pressing civil matters. More than 60 million Americans have incomes at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty line and qualify for civil legal assistance—an income of \$13,613 for an individual and \$27,938 for a family of four.

Funding for LSC was at its highest-ever mark, in inflation adjusted dollars, in fiscal 1981. That year some 6,200 poverty lawyers filed suits using its funds on behalf of 1.5 million eligible poor clients; its lawyers won almost 80 percent of their cases, which mostly involved divorces, evictions, repossessions, and eligibility for public assistance. The LSC budget was \$321 million in 1981, which would, according to LSC Chairman John Levi, convert to \$750 million in today's dollars.

The LSC was strongly opposed by Ronald Reagan,

who advocated ending all federal subsidies for free legal services to the poor in civil cases. Reagan attempted to eliminate the LSC by zero funding it. *Time* magazine noted in 1983, "Of all the social programs growing out of the Great Society, there is none that Ronald Reagan dislikes more than the Legal Services Corporation."

Reagan, although unsuccessful in eliminating LSC, was able to substantially reduce its funding to \$260 million. Under both Presidents George H. Bush and Bill Clinton the LSC budgets did increase, but these increases were conditioned upon restricting the range of services that Legal Aid attorneys could provide. For example, LSC-funded organizations could no longer serve as counsel in class action lawsuits challenging the way public benefits are administered. Additionally, LSC grantees faced tightened restrictions on representing immigrants, specifically those illegally in the country. This restriction was later ruled unconstitutional (*Legal Services Corp. v. Velazquez*).

Under the Obama administration, despite the massive increase in unemployment and the corresponding increase in evictions, repossessions, wage garnishments, denial of public benefits, etc.—all issues that Legal Aid attorneys address—funding for the LSC remained at about \$400 million and is now being cut by \$50 million.

As the economic crisis deepens, the attack on the Legal Services Corporation serves to illustrate that even minimal civil legal representation for the poorest and most oppressed workers no longer can be tolerated.



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