



Justice denied: Barbara K. Roman and Adrian D. Thompson

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By **Plain Dealer guest columnist**

The Plain Dealer reported in March of a drastic \$450,000 cut in federal funding to The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland this year. It's critical that Clevelanders understand two points:

First, the loss of free legal services that these cuts portend will have a devastating impact on Northeast Ohio's poor. Two-thirds of the victims of the cuts will be women and children. These cuts are about more than lost legal services. Beyond all else, the law is a firewall staving off personal devastation for the poor.

Second, the battle for justice will not stop. Justice must become even more of a broad community commitment. These cuts, like some unrelenting poison, spread their damage to families, veterans, the elderly, neighborhoods, our justice system and social services, to the marketplace and beyond.

Last year, Legal Aid helped 26,000 people. Slicing off \$450,000 means fewer can be helped to fend off poverty's travails: foreclosures, domestic abuse, denials of benefits, rapacious slumlords and hopelessness.

As it is, the agency -- at 51 staff attorneys and 1,600 pro bono volunteers, one of the largest law firms in Northeast Ohio -- can meet only half the demand for its services.

These cuts more than triple last year's federal budget cut -- and these are on top of a separate \$2.6 million drop in income, from \$3.38 million to \$700,000, derived from interest on lawyers' trust and escrow accounts.

All told, these cuts translate into a 33 percent decrease in Legal Aid's revenue. Some of this decrease will be countered by philanthropy, but it is impossible to make up this deficit in such a short time. This year's Legal Aid budget is \$6.6 million but would (and should) be \$9.65 million.

The 2012 Congress appropriated \$348 million for the nation's 136 Legal Aid societies. That's less than half of Congress' appropriation 33 years ago, in 1979. And next year, Congress is considering another \$20 million cut.

Across the nation, Legal Aid societies have slashed services to the poor. West Texas Legal Aid cut its expenses by \$2.2 million. Florida is expected to lose 120 of its 410 legal aid attorneys. As The Miami Herald editorialized, "The timing of such a funding disaster could not be worse. More and more Florida families are

facing foreclosure and winding up on the streets."

And, obviously, this is as true in our region, where the number of people in poverty soared 31 percent between 2000 and 2009, to more than 322,000.

For 107 years in Northeast Ohio, Legal Aid has used the power of the law to make lives better far beyond the particulars of a legal case:

- Legal Aid saves a single mother from foreclosure, holding a family together, keeping it in a home, enabling the children to finish school and begin careers.
- Legal Aid accomplishes what a desperate mother couldn't when a school district ignored her pleas for special services (due by law) for her speech-delayed daughter who suffered from seizures.
- Legal Aid wins benefits for a disabled vet in Ashtabula who had been ordered to repay \$39,000 in Veterans Affairs benefits.

These are small moments in the big scheme, but priceless to those assisted. Annually, Legal Aid's economic impact on the region is in excess of \$38 million, in homes saved, benefits restored and wages recovered.

Each case is an example of this community pushing back the darkness, using the power of the law for justice and for good, setting lives on a better path.

Despite slashed budgets, Cleveland's Legal Aid remains a leader in the field, taking cases and pursuing justice every day.

But fewer people will be helped. For too many people, injustice will prevail.

Legal Aid will continue, with the help of hundreds of supporters and numerous nonprofit partners. But Legal Aid needs more of our community's help, with more donations, especially, and more volunteers. The Cleveland Bar Association is working to develop new pro bono programs with Legal Aid for domestic relations cases and to serve veterans. Others should join us.

Legal Aid's mission has embodied the commitment of a great city to its most vulnerable since 1905.

It is a cooperative pursuit of justice that is as valid and as essential to the future of this city now as it was then.

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