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Defunding Legal Services Corp., per Trump's wishes, would cut almost \$4 million from local legal aid groups

By Jeremy Nobile



The
Legal Aid Society
— *of Cleveland*
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Legal aid groups once again face a potential budget slashing as part of a recent proposal by President Donald Trump at a time when their resources are already stretched thin.

Trump's Feb. 12 budget proposal for the 2019 fiscal year lists the nonprofit Legal Services Corp. among 22 agencies and 66 programs recommended for defunding.

The LSC is the country's largest single funder of legal aid, distributing more than 94% of its funding — which amounted to \$385 million annually for the past two years — to some 800 offices, according to the agency.

In Northeast Ohio, eliminating the LSC would sap roughly 30% of the budgets for Cleveland and Akron's respective legal aid groups.

This issue was first faced as part of Trump's budget proposal last year. But Congress preserved funding for the LSC another year despite the desire by the president to eliminate it.

While local legal aid groups are emboldened by the support from lawmakers that came last year, a new push for defunding of the LSC has rekindled worries of how their programs could serve the

needy should their funding be slashed.

"I think it remains to be seen what will happen, but we can look to last year, hopefully, as a guide post that there is strong bipartisan support to keep the LSC funded," said Melanie Shakarian, a spokesperson for The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

The group's current budget is \$9 million. About 25% of that (about \$2.2 million) is provided by the LSC.

Cleveland legal aid "impacted" 18,057 people in 2017 through 7,743 cases. That's about on par with what the organization accomplished in the prior year, where 7,400 cases were handled that impacted an estimated 17,700 people.

Legal aid groups regularly turn away roughly half of all people who come seeking assistance on a national basis.

And federal funding carries a multiplier effect. Beyond those dollars being used to draw funds from other sources, they're often leveraged to clear often life-altering debts well beyond their face values and otherwise stabilize the financially insecure.

Shakarian said LSC funding last year directly leveraged \$6.75 million in other funds and allowed them to secure more than \$14.2 million of assets, income and decreased debt for clients.

"The single biggest obstacle to Legal Aid playing a greater role in the community's solutions to systemic poverty is having the financial resources to reach more families when and where they need civil legal counsel," Shakarian said. "LSC funding is important because it impacts Northeast Ohio in a unique way that leverages further private support and creates positive outcomes for those Legal Aid helps."

Akron's Community Legal Aid has a budget of \$5.52 million, and the LSC comprises 32% (about \$1.7 million) of that. Executive director Steven McGarrity said the group closed 5,900 cases last year, which included assistance for 544 veterans, 909 seniors, 1,023 victims of domestic violence and 1,531 people with disabilities.

"Before I joined the leadership team at Legal Aid, I directly represented clients in cases," McGarrity said. "And I can tell you first-hand, the difference a lawyer can make in someone's life, someone struggling in poverty, is unlike any other help you can provide that person. Organizations like homeless shelters and food banks are critically important because they help people at that moment of crisis. But our work, our whole goal, is to help people avoid that point of crisis in the first place."

Officials seem hopeful lawmakers' support for the LSC will continue as it did in 2017.

But the future is never certain.

"I am optimistic that Congress will continue to fund LSC," said LSC president Jim Sandman in a statement, "because LSC promotes the most fundamental of American values — equal justice under law. Both the House and the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to continue to fund LSC after the administration's proposal to eliminate LSC last year, and just last week Congress voted to give

LSC an additional \$15 million to fund legal services for victims of recent natural disasters. LSC has had broad bipartisan support on Capitol Hill for more than 40 years. And we have it now."

The LSC estimates its funding helped nearly 1.8 million people across the country in 2016.

The group is seeking \$564.8 million for fiscal year 2019, which reflects an increase of \$37 million over last year's request that was ultimately met with \$385 million, the same amount allocated in fiscal year 2017.

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