

Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission

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March 29, 2011

Sen. Alberta Darling
Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Room 317 East
State Capitol
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Rep. Robin Vos
Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Room 309 East
State Capitol
P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Sen. Darling and Rep. Vos:

The Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission urges the Joint Finance Committee to maintain the state's commitment to fund civil legal services for Wisconsin's poorest and most vulnerable residents by restoring funding for civil legal services in the budget and thereby continuing Wisconsin's investment in equal justice.

Every state faces budget challenges but Wisconsin is the only state proposing a complete elimination of state funding for civil legal aid services at a time when demand for help with issues like foreclosure, bankruptcy, abuse, hunger and homelessness is increasing.

Wisconsin currently provides about \$2.6 million per year in state funding for civil legal aid services for Wisconsin residents who are unable to obtain legal assistance any other way because they have little or no income, are elderly, or are victims of abuse. The funding for the program comes from the "Justice Information Surcharge" (\$4.00 of the \$21.50 fee). The proposed budget redirects that \$4.00 to other programs, eliminating all state funding for civil legal services.

The impact of this sudden and complete cut-off of state funding will be severe. It will quickly affect residents in every city, town and village in Wisconsin:

- At least 40 legal services staff positions will be lost, leaving at least 3,376 clients to face critical legal problems alone.
- These and other low-income families and individuals, senior citizens, and disabled persons will have no legal assistance when facing illegal eviction, foreclosure, threats of family violence or neglect, bankruptcy, consumer fraud, or wrongful denials of state or federal benefits such as food stamps, health insurance, or unemployment compensation.
- An already overburdened justice system will experience more unrepresented parties, more delays and more civil problems that spiral into even more expensive criminal issues.

The **Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission** was established by an order of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Its mission is to develop and encourage means of expanding access to the civil justice system for unrepresented, low-income Wisconsin residents. Learn more at <http://wisatj.org/>

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Therefore, the Commission respectfully urges the Legislature to restore this vital funding so that Wisconsin's legal services providers can continue to offer these critically important services for our state's most disadvantaged residents. **A meaningful opportunity to obtain equal justice must be available and accessible to all.**

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregg M. Moore". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gregg" being the most prominent.

Gregg M. Moore
President

cc: Members of the Joint Committee on Finance