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Lawyers lobby for \$4.5 million hike in legal aid funding Advocates cite growing caseloads

The Boston Globe

By Janette Neuwahl, Globe Correspondent | March 9, 2005

More than 350 lawyers walked the halls of the State House yesterday hoping to encourage lawmakers to increase funding for legal aid. The lobbying was part of the Massachusetts and Boston Bar Association's sixth annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid.

The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation is asking the state for an increase of \$4.5 million for its general support fund, up from the current \$3.3 million, to reach a total budget of \$7.8 million. Legal aid groups argue that \$3.3 million will not cover their operating costs and increasing caseloads as laid off employees and domestic violence victims continue to flood their agencies.

The advocates said the extra money would be used to assist more clients such as elderly people who are victims of mortgage scams, domestic violence victims trying to get child custody, and low-income people with employment problems and difficulty getting healthcare.

The attorneys included Nicholas O'Donnell, who takes an occasional pro bono case from legal aid agencies amid his private casework. O'Donnell said he has to decline many of the cases.

"A lot of the cases I take are from legal services agencies that don't have the staff to work on them," O'Donnell said. "But there are a lot of cases when private lawyers can't help out and those people fall through the cracks."

Lonnie Powers, executive director of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, said that state funding -- which makes up 28 percent of MLAC's budget -- has not been able to keep up with the demand, forcing legal aid clinics in the state to turn away clients. With the extra \$4.5 million of funding requested yesterday, legal aid agencies could take on more than 4,000 new cases, Powers estimated.

"Currently we turn away more than half of all clients in Massachusetts," said Pattye Comfort, director of the Equal Justice Coalition and organizer of yesterday's event. MLAC employees estimate that legal aid agencies closed 28,000 cases for 120,000 Bay State residents last year. Advocates argue that legal aid funding pays for itself because the services have helped many clients get Social Security disability insurance from the federal government instead of draining the state for monthly checks.

Governor Mitt Romney proposes to keep the general civil legal aid account at \$3.3 million.

Members of the House and Senate Ways and Means committees are in the midst of annual budget hearings. Senator Andrea F. Nuciforo Jr. told lawyers that the time is ripe for all types of advocacy groups to make their appeals to state legislators.

"If there is one way we can address the problems in the Commonwealth, it is to provide the funding that MLAC needs," said the Pittsfield Democrat and former Ways and Means Committee member. "But this is one of many competitive causes." ■

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