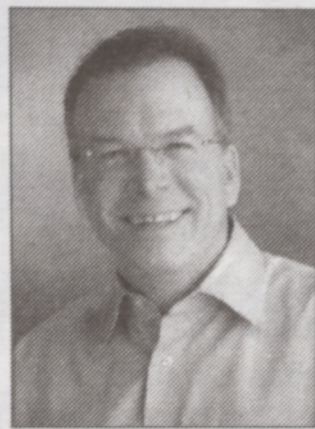


Fund legal services for the poor



Nick Fish is a Portland City Commissioner. He was a civil rights lawyer before he was elected to the Council in 2008.

“Equal justice under law” is a core value of our nation. But what happens when a victim of domestic violence, or an older adult facing eviction, can’t afford a lawyer? What happens when millions of Americans don’t have access to justice?

We may be about to find out. For more than 40 years, Congress has funded legal services for low-income Americans. President Donald Trump recently proposed to defund the Legal Services Corporation, or LSC. Here’s why it matters to all of us.

Background

The LSC was created by the Legal Services Corporation Act of 1974. In an earlier message to Congress, President Nixon said, “[h]ere each day the old, the unemployed, the underprivileged, and the largely forgotten people of our Nation may seek help.”

The LSC has enjoyed bi-partisan support ever since.

Warren Rudman, a former Republican Senator from New Hampshire, was an eloquent defender of the program: “The legal services program is based on a very simple, conservative, and critically important premise. Respect for the rule of law, and faith in our country’s system of justice, cannot exist among people who have no meaningful access to our courts.”

The late – and famously conservative – Justice Antonin Scalia once said that the LSC “pursues the most fundamental of American ideals, and it pursues equal justice in those areas of life most important to the lives of our citizens.”

Closer to home, our two Democratic Senators, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, and Republicans Gordon Smith and Mark Hatfield before them, have been outspoken champions of legal aid.

Federal Funding

In order to fund a big increase in the military budget, and a wall with Mexico, President Trump has proposed eliminating funding for legal services, the arts, and

community block grants for affordable housing.

Last year, the LSC’s budget was \$385 million. That’s 0.01 percent of the total federal budget. By contrast, the Department of Defense receives \$602 billion, 16 percent of federal spending. In fact, the government spends more on our 137 military bands (\$437 million) than on legal services for the poor.

Oregon

In Oregon, we believe in justice for all – not just for those who can afford it.

Each year, legal aid provides free civil legal services to more than 22,000 poor and elderly Oregonians. It focuses on essential legal services: food, shelter, medical care, civil rights and safety.

Around 850,000 low-income Oregonians qualify for free legal services. Currently, there is only one legal aid lawyer for every 8,500 people.

Legal aid programs are funded by a unique federal, state and private partnership. The annual budget is roughly \$15 million. One third comes from direct federal funding, while another third comes from the state. In 2014, Governor Kate Brown signed a law directing some of the funds from unclaimed damages in class action lawsuits to legal aid.

The Bar has stepped up as well. The Campaign for Equal Justice was formed in 1991. It has raised \$26 million to support the important work of legal aid.

The elimination of the LSC would be catastrophic for our state. Oregon would lose nearly \$4.6 million in federal funding.

My Dad

For me, this fight is personal.

As a law student at Northeastern, I volunteered at Jamaica Plains Legal Services. I helped disabled clients qualify for Supplemental Security Income benefits. And for 20 years I have been a proud foot soldier in the

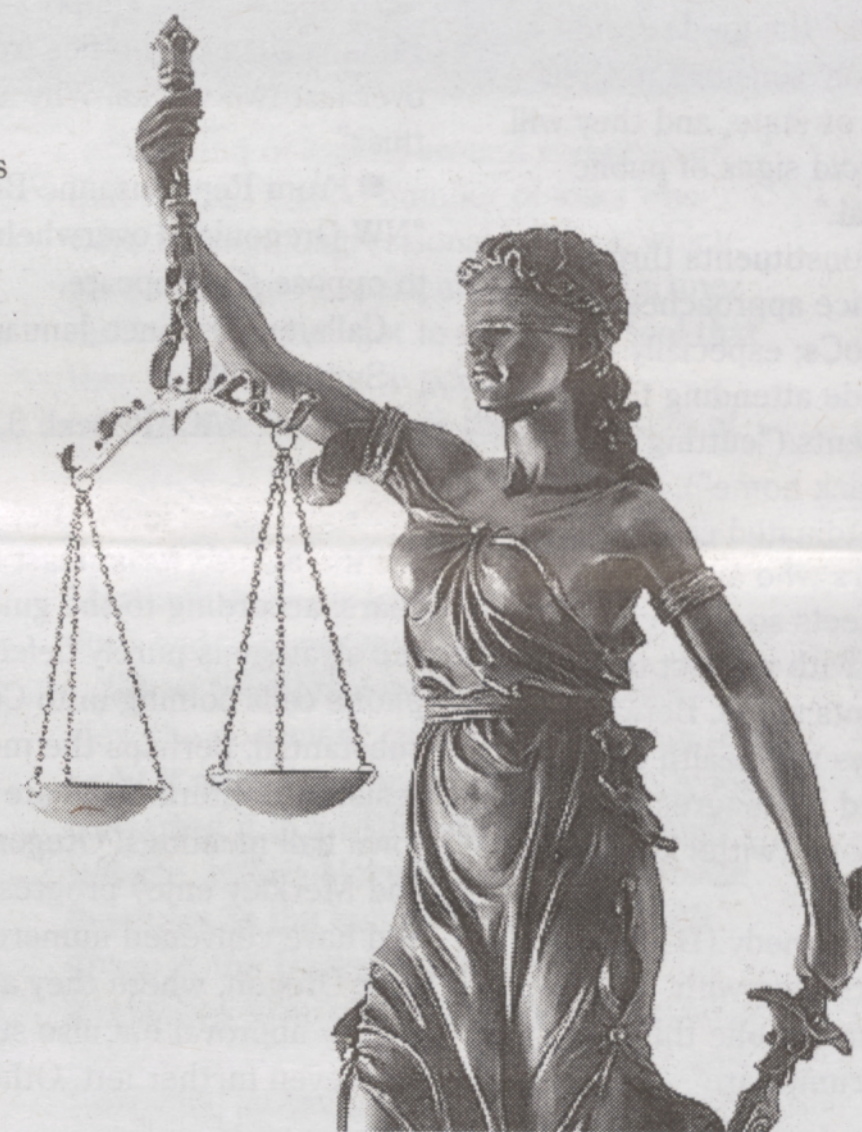
Campaign for Equal Justice.

My dad served in Congress and was a strong supporter of legal services. In 1995, President Bill Clinton asked him to serve on the LSC board. I helped him fill out the necessary paperwork. Unfortunately, he died before he could be confirmed for the position.

When going through his papers, I found a draft of an essay he wrote, titled, “Why this Republican Believes in Legal Services for the Poor.” He wrote as follows:

“If a member of my family were poor, and needed civil legal help, I would want them to get it. Who wouldn’t? Legal services attorneys meet this vital need and the Legal Services Corporation deserves the support of all of us – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike.”

Congress should reject any reduction in funding for the LSC, and continue the proud American tradition of bi-partisan support for equal justice under law.



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