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May 1, 2010**

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OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Legal Aid is More Important than Ever Cuts at the expense of the poor

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

As part of its efforts to curtail government spending, Congress recently cut funding to Legal Services Corp., a non-profit group that funds more than 100 state programs that provide legal aid to the poor. So far, the government has slashed nearly \$16 million from the organization's budget; next year, they want to cut an additional \$104 million.

It's admirable that the government is searching for ways to balance our ballooning national budget. But, once again, our elected officials are looking in the wrong places and cutting much needed services.



Legal aid services around the country help low-income individuals with their civil (non-criminal) legal needs. Legal aid offices also handle cases that involve housing matters, unfair evictions, foreclosures and more. Custody and child-support cases are also some of the common services legal aid has given to innumerable families over the years.

With so many Americans unemployed or under-employed and unable to meet their financial obligations, it stands to reason that the need for legal aid is more important than ever. Indeed, the number of people eligible for such services has increased nearly 30-percent in

the last three years. Why then, is the government taking away from this organization at a time when it should be expanding?

Balancing the nation's budget is critical, but it cannot and should not be done at the expense of the poor. If the government wants to slash spending, it should take a magnifying glass to the inflated \$1 trillion defense budget. Until the U.S. can figure out a sustainable way to lift its people out of poverty, the country has a duty to provide services to help the poor. Legal aid is one of many programs that should be immune to Congress' budget raiding ways.

Of course, the holes in the national justice gap are something the private sector must address as well. More lawyers need to provide pro bono - free - services to low-

income individuals. Lawyers who grew up poor should feel a sense of obligation to give back to the communities they grew up in.

Some law firms do require attorneys to contribute a certain number of pro-bono hours each year; we need more to follow suit and do the same. If the government doesn't see the importance of legal aid services - especially at this time in history - then our business community must step forward and help ease the burden.

Judge Mathis is a national figure known for his advocacy campaigns for equal justice. His inspirational life story of a street youth who rose from jail to judge has provided hope to millions who watch him on the television court show Judge Mathis.

Missing the Mark on African-American Jobless

The 'white like me' tour

BY WILLIAM REED

Before he went to Martha's Vineyard for 10 days at a 1,200-acre, \$50,000 a week



hobby ranch, President Obama's three-day tour of the American heartland last month illustrated his re-election plans and strategy. In the "white like me" tour, Obama sought to get the attention of population segments disillusioned with him and infuse Middle-American voters with optimism, while convincing them that his approach offers the most rational path to economic stability.

The tour allowed Obama a picture-perfect platform to strategically

define the Republicans as so unwilling to compromise they would risk financial chaos. But, the visits allowed Obama to press the flesh among America's heartland and brought controversy and discussions about Obama's presidential job performance and the policies he supports.

The bus tour had the trappings of a candidate wooing voters. The trip, with all the presidential accessories in tow, took Obama through rural hamlets in Minnesota, Iowa and western Illinois and allowed him to shore up his posture in the polls and his political position with white voters.

Obama went to Henry County, Ill., which has a Black population of 2.2 percent; to Winneshiek County, Iowa which is 0.6 percent African American. In Decorah, Iowa, Obama declared he'd propose a major jobs

package to Congress this month.

Obama's not delivering for any segment of the American population except the rich. But, a soaring jobless rate among African Americans and a newfound comfort by black lawmakers to criticize Obama's economic policies should prompt White House officials to focus more directly on black America.

Urban blacks are experiencing 25 percent unemployment and the White House needs more collaboration and cooperation from leaders in black America. At a jobs forum in Detroit, Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., blasted the president's bus tour and has asserted that Obama skipped hard-hit African Americans and their communities. Waters said "We want to give him every opportunity but ... the unemployment is unconscionable."

African American joblessness is 16.2 percent, and nearly 41 percent for black teens. In spite of those numbers, a Washington Post/ABC News poll shows Obama still enjoying rock solid support among African Americans - an 86 percent approval rating for the way he's handled the economy. Among whites and independent voters, Obama gets a 26 percent rating.

Waters is right saying, "It's time for us to step up and note that our communities are not being dealt with and to make sure that this administration understands that we cannot continue to go on this way and ... we cannot be quiet. We have decided that not only are we going to remind the administration about the

devastation and the pain that we're experiencing, but we want to be a part of helping to develop the solution. Whatever the plan to be unveiled in September, we intend to be a part of it."

When will the administration pay attention to black needs? What will it take for African Americans to be a part of Obama's plans for the nation? Obama need not go further than National Urban League President Marc Morial's 12-Point Plan for Job Creation.

The League's plan is based on Urban Jobs Act legislation sponsored by New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Brooklyn Rep. Edolphus Towns. The Urban Jobs Act provides federal grant funding to non-profit organizations to offer job training, education and support services for urban youth and young adults.

Funding Urban Jobs Act programs makes sense. It can help eliminate black unemployment. The Obama administration needs to fund targeted programs that connect at-risk youth to jobs and gives 18 to 24-year olds skills training, mentoring, and GED preparation.

When President Obama speaks to the nation about the labor situation on Thursday, Sept. 8 in an address to Congress, he's expected to present new and relevant initiatives to grow the economy and create jobs. It would be gratifying to see Obama present the Urban Jobs Act to the public among his recommendations to put Americans back to work.

William Reed is president of Black Press International.

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