

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Knab: Legal aid services should be a priority

Kristine Knab – February 18, 2015

The Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice held its first meeting on Jan. 16, recognizing the inability of many Floridians to access legal help. The same day the Tallahassee Democrat article, “Commission working towards legal access,” noted that less than 10 percent of the legal needs of poor Floridians are being met.

As executive director of Legal Services of North Florida, Inc. (LSNF), I see firsthand every day the families and lives affected by limited legal aid available to those who otherwise can’t afford it in our community.

Throughout 16 counties in the Florida Panhandle, LSNF provides no-cost civil legal services to individuals who can’t afford them. Approximately 230,000 individuals below the 125 percent poverty line qualify for these services.

Legal services provided by LSNF include domestic and sexual violence cases, homeless legal representation, elder and family law cases and disaster relief. Last year our in-house staff and volunteer attorneys served over 7,200 clients.

However, the demand for legal aid to those who are in need remains high.

The stories are sobering: seniors on fixed incomes with rising medical bills; individuals looking for refuge from sexual and domestic violence; families facing unfortunate circumstances in need of assistance with reuniting their loved ones; and veterans returning home facing foreclosure due to the economic downturn. All of these individuals deserve legal assistance. However, their financial situations prohibit them from getting it. Last year, LSNF’s representation helped clients receive \$1.6 million in one-time benefits and \$5.6 million in annual benefits. LSNF attorneys successfully secured 262 protection injunctions and dissolved 64 marriages marked by violence.

While our clients know financial burdens all too well, Legal Services’ offices around the state and country are also feeling the financial burden. Today there is a crisis in legal aid funding and legal aid services. For instance, there were 21 lawyers on staff at LSNF in 2010 compared to 16 today. In Florida, there are 410 legal aid attorneys compared to 1,600 public defenders. Between 2010 and 2014, LSNF lost nearly \$760,000 in annual funding.

Our primary funding sources include grants, donations and support from the national Legal Services Corporation. However, many of these funding sources have had to make significant reductions to grantees. Making matters worse, for fiscal year 2016, we expect to lose up to \$860,000 in additional funding.

LSNF is just one of a few organizations in the Panhandle that provides legal services to those in need. LSNF looks forward to the opportunity to offer information and input as

the Commission pursues this critical discussion about access to legal aid services. The discussion must be had, the voices of those who desperately need these services must be heard and we must continue to preserve hope and justice for all. Kristine E. Knab, Esq. is executive director of Legal Services of North Florida which provides legal assistance to eligible clients over a 16-county area in North Florida.