

## **Bloomington Pantagraph**

**Legal services funds may be cut | Sunday, September 8, 2002**  
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BLOOMINGTON – Fewer people living in poverty in Illinois could spell trouble for the state's remaining poor people who need free legal services.

That's because federal funding for legal aid programs is based on 2000 census figures that showed the number of Illinois residents eligible for free services dropped by 35,000. As a result, the state will lose about \$920,000 next year in funding from Legal Services Corp., the federal agency that distributes money for legal assistance.

In addition, the recent economic downturn and falling interest rates are cutting into other sources of funding for legal aid programs, experts say.

"There's pressure from every direction, and it's all negative," said Ruth Ann Schmitt, executive director for the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois.

The trust fund, which was created by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1983, draws interest on accounts lawyers hold in trusts for their clients. But due to 11 interest-rate cuts last year by the Federal Reserve, the fund this year is expected to distribute only about half of the \$3.5 million it doled out to 34 legal aid groups across the state last year.

A loss of funding from the trust fund would exacerbate the Legal Services Corp. cuts that will shave \$13,000, or roughly 5 percent, from the budget of Prairie State Legal Services in Bloomington, said the non-profit group's managing attorney, George Boyle.

"It's significant. It's going to be something we'll have to make up with local fund raising or other grants," Boyle said.

McLean County residents who can't afford an attorney in criminal cases typically are given a public defender, but those who need a lawyer for civil matters must apply at Prairie State.

Prairie State, which focuses on family law and basic need issues such as access to housing and medical care, also serves clients in Livingston and Woodford counties.

Boyle said Prairie State will try to recruit more local attorneys to handle pro bono cases to compensate for any loss in funding.

"Obviously, cuts in services and staff are the absolute last option," Boyle said.

Such cutbacks could have heavy consequences in Illinois, which mirrors a nationwide dearth in legal services for the poor. Among the 10 most populated states, Illinois ranks last in state funding for legal aid programs, said Legal Services Corp. spokesman Eric Kleiman.

“According to our best estimates, the funding was grossly inadequate in Illinois to begin with...The need is greater than ever,” Kleiman said.

Kleiman said there have been discussions in a U.S. Senate Appropriations subcommittee about restoring the loss of federal legal aid funding. He said it’s possible that a deal could be worked out during budget negotiations with members of the U.S. House.

“There’s still some outside hope that Congress will kind of throw us a life preserver,” Kleiman said.

Meanwhile, the state Supreme Court is considering a proposal that would hike attorney registration fees to compensate for the loss of revenue from the Lawyers Trust Fund. Supreme Court spokesman Joseph Tybor couldn’t say when the justices will decide the issue.