

## Legal aid funding for the poor quadruples in new budget

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BY MARY TALLON

SPRINGFIELD -- When the governor unveiled his plan for the state budget earlier this year, attorneys for the poor thought they were losing their entire \$500,000 state subsidy. Now, they're getting four times that amount.

Lawmakers added an unexpected \$2 million for civil legal aid programs during the final hours of negotiations on the state budget.

"This will never be the most attractive issue, but it really strikes to the heart of our democratic society," said state Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg (D-Evanston), who argued for the money during backroom negotiations as legislators struggled to close a \$1.2 billion budget gap.

The programs give people who cannot afford their own lawyers free representation. Legal aid attorneys consult with clients and file lawsuits in non-criminal matters such as child custody issues and housing problems.

### Another 22,000 can be helped

A recent study by a coalition of lawyers groups found that low-income Illinois residents faced more than 1.3 million civil legal problems in 2003. But that year, legal aid lawyers were able to assist with just 218,000 cases.

Illinois legal aid groups had a total budget of \$36 million that year, including federal money that has been decreasing and donations from lawyers that have not made up for the losses, according to the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign.

The group said in January that the system needed \$5 million in state contributions. But in February, Gov. Blagojevich released a proposed budget that would eliminate the state subsidy entirely, previously \$472,900.

Blagojevich budget spokeswoman Becky Carroll said the governor agreed to instead increase the subsidy after reviewing studies showing Illinois below other states in money for legal aid. "This is an attempt on our part to get on par with the national standard," Carroll said.

Leslie Corbett, executive director of Equal Justice Illinois Campaign, said the state funding increase could be used to expand legal aid hot lines and self-help centers and to help an additional 22,000 people.

"It's definitely a giant leap forward," Corbett said. "Unfortunately, some of the same arguments that we've been putting forth this year are still true."

Even with the increase, Illinois would still rank last out of the 10 most populous states in the amount of money it provides for legal aid. Georgia, which is ninth, appropriated \$2.2 million last year.

*AP*