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State kicks in \$3.5 million for legal aid in fiscal 2007

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State funding for legal aid is expected to jump to \$3.5 million in 2007, an increase that legal aid advocates hope will offset a decline in federal funding.

"I'm just thrilled," said Leslie A. Corbett, executive director of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, which distributes the state funding. "The \$3.5 million really will enable us to help an additional 20,000 people gain access to the legal system."

Corbett said advocates for increased legal aid funding had long stressed that, among the 10 most populous states, Illinois ranked last in legal aid funding.

"This moves us up to eighth and we're happy with that," Corbett said.

The legislature has approved the state's 2007 budget, and Gov. [Rod R. Blagojevich](#) intends to sign it, said spokeswoman Rebecca Rausch.

But she and [Philip J. Rock](#), co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign and former Illinois Senate president, said more work remains to be done.

"I'd like to see us have close to double what we currently have," Rock said. "The need is certainly there."

For 2006, the state appropriated \$1.9 million for legal aid, up from \$473,000 in previous years.

Corbett attributes much of the change in attitude on legal aid funding to the 2005 release of a legal needs study that found low-income Illinois households got help for one of every six legal problems they faced in 2003.

"With the legislators we had some cold, hard numbers that showed what a problem this was for their constituents, particularly downstate," Corbett said.

"This just isn't a controversial issue anymore," Corbett said of the need for more legal aid

funding. "There was a time when it was considered controversial."

According to a news release from the Equal Justice Foundation, among the 10 most populous states, the average appropriation for legal aid is \$7.1 million.

Federal Legal Services Corp. funding, which is the largest source of support for legal aid, has dropped by 38 percent over the last 15 years, when adjusted for inflation, the release said. Outside of Cook County, 84 legal aid attorneys are available to serve nearly 400,000 low-income people.

Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation Inc., which serves many of those counties, announced a reorganization plan late last year in which it lost three attorney positions.

[Lois J. Wood](#), executive director of the foundation, said that as a result of loss of staff, she estimates the agency lost the ability to serve several hundred clients. She hopes now to be able to add staff back because of the state budget increase.

"We are so strained in trying to provide that service," Wood said.

The legal aid funding is provided through the Office of the Attorney General, and Rock said Attorney General [Lisa Murray Madigan](#) has been key to the effort to increase funding. In the news release issued Monday, Madigan said more needs to be done.

"While the General Assembly has wisely increased the funds available for legal aid, we must continue to increase those funds so that we do not have a system of haves and have-nots when it comes to justice," Madigan said.

[Michael T. O'Connor](#), executive director of Prairie State Legal Services Inc., which serves much of northern Illinois with the exception of Cook County, said the increase is "huge and it couldn't be more timely."

He said that the Legal Services Corp., which once provided about 80 percent of the agency's funding, now provides just under 40 percent.

Corbett thanked state Sens. [Kirk W. Dillard](#) and Jeffrey M. Schoenberg, as well as State Rep. Patricia Reid Lindner, for their support. She also praised Rock and former governor [James R. Thompson](#), the other co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign.

The Equal Justice Foundation also announced the 2006 recipients of its grants, which for the first time included awards for housing and consumer law. That was based on the results of the legal needs survey, "The Legal Aid Safety Net," released by a coalition of legal aid advocates and bar groups.

The Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago received three state grants, including a new \$30,000 grant to provide help with housing issues to families in the south

suburbs.

The agency is now working to develop a partnership with the court to have its attorneys present in the courthouse to help with housing issues in south suburban areas, said agency Executive Director [Sheldon H. Roodman](#).

Like O'Connor, Roodman said state funding is becoming increasingly important as the agency tries to sustain its programs and create new ones.

Federal Legal Services Corp. funding, which he said has been on the decline for years, makes up half of his agency's funding.

"Our program needs to grow \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year just to stay even," Roodman said.

Among the agencies receiving grant funding for the first time was the Lawyers Committee for Better Housing in Chicago, which received a \$15,000 grant that which will go primarily toward a pro bono coordinator, said [Kathleen K. Clark](#), executive director of the agency.

The agency works with tenants on evictions, building conditions, fair housing and other issues. Clark said she was pleased that the survey highlighted the need for housing assistance. The survey found that just over one in five low-income households faced a legal problem related to housing.

"We were really happy to see that come out in the study," Clark said. "We knew it anecdotally."