



February 18, 2005

**Section:** News

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## Attorneys upset legal aid targeted in budget

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DECATUR — Legal aid attorneys were upset Gov. Rod Blagojevich's initial budget proposal eliminated the state's appropriation for civil legal aid. The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation issued a news release Thursday afternoon denouncing the proposed cut of \$472,000 in funding for legal aid to the poor. Hours later, Tom Green, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Human Services, said the funding would be restored. He said it initially fell through the cracks in a tight budget year.

"We recognize the importance of legal aid to the poor, so we are going to find the money to fund it," Green said.

Green said he thought the funding would be restored to the same level. Green said the state provides the funding to the Equal Justice Foundation, which then doles it out to other agencies.

The budget proposal came on the heels of the Feb. 8 release of a statewide study by a coalition of lawyers' groups that found low-income Illinoisans are able to get legal help for one out of every six legal problems they face. The study recommended that the state increase its legal aid funding to \$5 million annually.

Legal aid attorneys say the system has long been underfunded. Bill Brown, directing attorney for the Decatur office of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, said he and one other attorney in his office handle cases in a five-county area that includes nearly 20,000 people living in poverty.

Brown and Clare McCulla, managing attorney for the Mattoon office of Land of Lincoln, said they are worried about possible cuts in federal funding for legal aid.

The federal Legal Services Corporation is the largest single source of support for legal aid in Illinois, according to the study. Eric Kleiman, spokesman for the Legal Services Corporation, said the agency is requesting a budget of \$363 million in 2006, an increase of \$33 million. Kleiman said the increase was requested in part because of rising numbers of low-income Americans eligible for legal aid.

President Bush is proposing the agency's budget be cut by \$12.8 million. Kleiman said the Legal Services Corporation is an independent agency and Bush's proposal is merely a recommendation.

"The reality of federal funding of equal justice is we struggle to get even modest increases in funding," he said. "If the states don't pick up the slack, no one's going to pick up the slack."

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