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Free Legal Services on the wane | August 30, 2002

Budget cut by \$50,000, but attorney vows central Illinois poor will not be left in lurch

By: Christopher R. Williams

Prairie State Legal Service Inc. of Peoria managing attorney Lisa Y. Wilson vows that poor central Illinoisans will continue to have free lawyers to assist them, despite funding cuts.

“There has been a decrease in funding to this Prairie State Legal office by about \$50,000,” Wilson said Thursday. “That means that we will lose money to supply one attorney, but we should be able to continue to manage. It’s not having the impact as it is having in Chicago” and at other agencies statewide.

Wilson’s office, at 331 Fulton St., Suite 600, serves poor residents in the counties of Peoria, Tazewell, Woodford, Marshall and Stark.

Wilson learned from Eric Kleiman, a spokesman for Legal Services Corp.-the Washington DC based agency that distributes federal money for free legal aid programs in Illinois-that LSC will lose about \$920,000 in congressional funding annually.

Besides Prairie State, LSC also funds Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, and Alton-based Land of Lincoln Legal Services.

The cuts will take the biggest bit out of Land of Lincoln, a network of eight offices and 40 lawyers who help clients in southern Illinois with problems such as eviction, access to Social Security and obtaining orders of protection from abusive spouses, Kleiman said.

The LSC allocates money to states based on the number of poor counties in the last census. The 2000 census showed Illinois with about 35,000 fewer people who are eligible for LSC services.

Although the three groups deliver most of the legal aid in Illinois, dozens of other programs offer similar services, and all will feel the pain when the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois doles out grants for 2003.

The fund, created by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1983, gets interest from escrow accounts and other money lawyers often keep for their clients, and spend it on legal aid. This year, the fund will likely award just half of the \$3.5 million it usually gives some 34 groups statewide, said Ruth Ann Schmidt, the trust funds executive director.

The Illinois General Assembly had appropriated about \$500,000 annually for legal aid in recent years, an amount Bartylak said has not been much reduced. Still, of the nation’s

ten most populous states, Illinois ranks last in the amount of money legislators appropriate for legal aid, LSC President John Erlenborn said earlier this year.

Peoria County State's Attorney Kevin Lyons said all the budget cuts will not affect poor criminals because the state court appoints public defenders.