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PERSPECTIVE

Draft budget would slash legal aid funds

By Ronald B. Turovsky

President Donald J. Trump's first draft budget includes the elimination of funding for the Legal Services Corporation. This has renewed the ongoing national debate over LSC and whether government should fund legal assistance to the poor. The conservative Heritage Foundation, which now holds sway in the White House, has long advocated and argued for LSC's elimination. Many have weighed in on the opposite side, including such disparate supporters as Michigan Football coach Jim Harbaugh. They argue that LSC provides critical funding that enables the poor access to the courts and legal protection and justice.

In 2016, the LSC provided over \$43 million in funding to legal nonprofits across California. This includes Bay Area Legal Aid, California Indian Legal Services, California Rural Legal Assistance, Central California Legal Services, Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance, Inland Counties Legal Services, the Legal Aid Society of Orange County, the Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Legal Services of Northern California, and Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County. It also provides funding for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles — the oldest LSC-funded legal aid organization in California, where I have served in various capacities for over 10 years.

LAFLA was founded in 1929 as a clinic at USC Law School and now provides free civil legal services to over 80,000 people annually. LAFLA receives 40 percent of its funding from LSC, its largest funding source. LAFLA provides life-changing, critical services, and these cuts would have a drastic effect on both the people who rely on LAFLA and on the community.

LAFLA calls itself the "Frontline Law Firm for Poor and Low-Income People in Los Angeles" and it earns that title. To qualify as a LAFLA client for free legal services, a single person may earn no more than \$14,850 annually. The cap for a family of four is \$30,375. Nearly 2.5 million people in Los Angeles



New York Times News Service

President Donald Trump at a meeting with Republican lawmakers at the White House in Washington on Tuesday.

County qualify. Individuals with this income level cannot afford quality legal services.

LAFLA provides them a wide array of legal services. It provides assistance in recovering unpaid wages, restraining orders for domestic violence, eviction defense, and student loan forgiveness. LAFLA provides services to children who have had legal issues that caused setbacks in their health, such as poor housing conditions, problems at school, or violence at home.

LAFLA also provides free legal assistance to veterans living in Los Angeles County. Eight percent of LAFLA's clients are veterans. LAFLA is the oldest and largest free legal services program for veterans in Los Angeles. All low-income veterans living in Los Angeles County are eligible for free legal assistance. LAFLA provides assistance in obtaining VA benefits, child support, student loan and GI Bill issues, military discharge upgrades, and other services that veterans need and cannot get. Others talk about helping veterans. LAFLA does it every day.

LAFLA provides these services and many others with low "overhead." While the staff lawyers at LAFLA compare favorably to their counterparts in the public sector in quality, they earn a fraction of what they would earn in the for profit world. LAFLA leverages off of LSC support, working for donations,

grants, fee awards, and pro bono assistance from the big law firms and businesses in town. 1,526 volunteers donated 49,176 hours of legal work to LAFLA's clients.

The Heritage Foundation argues for LSC's elimination by asserting it is biased, promotes illegal immigration and racial preferences, and is the "legal pillar of the welfare state." This does not describe LSC from my first-hand experience as a LAFLA board member. LAFLA's only ideology is access to the courts for the poor. The qualification threshold is not racial but economic. A large percentage of its clients are minorities, but that is a function of the number of minorities living in poverty. Calling LSC the legal pillar of the welfare state is just rhetoric. LAFLA, for example, does not put its LSC funding to work by enacting laws or establishing immigration policy. LAFLA puts the funds to work by providing legal services to help the poor through the complex legal system so they may obtain those benefits. LAFLA provides legal services so that constitutional and statutory rights are protected. The argument seems to be that, while there may be programs and laws on the books that provide benefits and protections, let's cut off access to the legal system so that the benefits and protections cannot be obtained.

In light of the threats to LSC, contingency

plans are being formulated and alternative sources of funding would be explored by LAFLA. But these are not easy times for non-profits as it is and there is no easy path to find alternative funding. LAFLA can only get so many volunteers and private donations. Let's not kid ourselves: Without LSC funds, LAFLA's services will diminish and the critical role it plays will diminish. To use the description from the George H. W. Bush administration, this point of light will dim.

The problems encountered by the clients of California's legal nonprofits are not going to go away by cutting LSC. What will go away is legal protection for them. Residents here well know cities across California already struggle with a lack of affordable housing, homelessness, poverty, and care for veterans. Without legal representation, these prob-

LSC Funding for California Legal Aid Organizations*

	2016	2015
Bay Area Legal Aid	\$4,087,740	\$4,203,084
California Indian Legal Services, Inc.	\$928,034	\$910,144
California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.	\$7,726,368	\$7,406,703
Central California Legal Services	\$3,230,965	\$2,838,996
Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance, Inc.	\$1,152,590	\$1,018,963
Inland Counties Legal Services, Inc.	\$5,327,741	\$4,676,508
Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles	\$6,063,556	\$5,746,726
Legal Aid Society of Orange County, Inc.	\$3,846,958	\$3,514,880
Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Inc.	\$2,982,886	\$2,793,238
Legal Services of Northern California, Inc.	\$3,875,379	\$3,650,471
Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County	\$4,375,964	\$3,767,240
	\$43,598,181	\$40,526,953

* data from LSC.gov

lems will only increase.

LSC funding totals approximately \$375 million, compared to a total federal budget of \$3.8 trillion — 1/100th of 1 percent of total federal spending. Meanwhile, defense funding would be increased by \$54 billion and there

would be significant funding for 10,000 more customs and immigration agents and the many-billion dollar border wall, according to these same early draft budgets. This is not meant to enter the debate about the need for greater military spending and the other

subjects. Rather, this is meant to provide perspective and economic context, to point out how little would be gained economically by cutting LSC, and to point out how much would be lost.

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