

A letter from the editor:

Bashing the poor some more

The man who runs Blue Ridge Legal Services has a reputation for being someone who can squeeze Lincoln off a penny.

But chopping \$180,000 from the agency's budget is a bit much to ask.

That is what the federal government has done. Congress cut the budget to the Legal Aid by 15%, at a time when demand for its services is rising every day. The 15% cut comes on the heels of a 4% federal cut in April.

Blue Ridge Legal Services is the Legal Aid corporation that covers an area running from Harrisonburg to Roanoke, and includes Rockbridge County, Buena Vista and Lexington.

Without it, the increasing number of folks living in poverty would be deprived of lawyers to represent them in civil matters. Without representation in the legal system, for all practical purposes, those folks would have no access to it.

Last year, Blue Ridge Legal Services served more than 2,500 clients, and had to turn away about 5,000 due to its being short-staffed.

And it's done yeomans' work.

The agency's annual report for 2010 tells some of the story. That year, the agency:

- Assisted 81 victims of domestic violence and obtained court orders protecting 39 of them.
- Obtained guardianships for 21 incapacitated adults.
- Obtained divorces for 405 clients.
- Obtained child custody orders for 40 clients.
- Provided advice and counsel on debt and consumer issues for 485 clients.
- Challenged predatory lending practices on behalf on 19 clients, recovering nearly \$80,000.
- Successfully challenged eight illegal sales contracts, recovering \$28,000 and nullifying nearly \$14,000 in claims related to those contracts.
- Helped 26 clients wend their way through bankruptcy proceedings.
- Quashed 67 garnishments and liens, returning \$92,500 to clients.

The list goes on, but the numbers don't tell the full story.

The real story involves real human beings in the middle of nasty family disputes. It involves real human beings being hounded, sometimes illegally, by debt collectors.

It involves real human beings tangled up in

bureaucracies administering federal benefits, and real human beings caught up in landlord-tenant disputes, trapped by payday lenders, or at their wits' end over a fading elderly relative.

It involves real human beings faced with illegal foreclosures, and disputes with former employers over unemployment benefits.

As hard times have settled in, the need for Legal Aid's services has only increased.

The office in Lexington, which has had two full-time attorneys for years, has been swamped.

It's not uncommon to find at least one of the office's two lawyers working at night, or on weekends and holidays.

Because of the federal budget cut, the Lexington office had a choice: either close one day a week or reduce staffing.

One of the attorneys there, Shawna Cheney, volunteered to cut her job to half-time, and try to make up for the loss in pay by setting up a half-time private practice. That dumps even more work on the other attorney, Robin Mayer.

The Lexington office has been a beacon of hope for many of those living in poverty in the Rockbridge area.

Officially, the number of folks here living in poverty is nearly 6,000. The poverty rates for all three localities are above the state average.

And there are more joining the ranks every day.

There are homeless people, no one knows how many here, living in cars and campers and holed up in the National Forest.

There are folks who moved away for jobs who have moved back, can't find work, and are now living with parents or grandparents — and sometimes both — straining already tight family budgets.

There are hundreds of folks who have lost decent paying jobs in the building trades and are now either unemployed or working at minimum wage "service" jobs. There are people in "professional" fields who are now applying for food stamps and other benefits because their incomes have vanished.

There are folks working two or three jobs who still can't make ends meet for their families because the jobs pay minimum wages.

There are folks who have worked all their lives who don't have telephones — let alone internet service — because they can't afford them, and elderly people facing the choice of paying their rent or doing without the prescriptions and dental care they need to stay reasonably healthy.

The local Social Service office has been slammed. So has the Rockbridge Area Relief Association. So have the food banks, which are about to suffer from budget cuts to the distribution center where they obtain most of their food.

Whether Congress should be cutting spending in the midst of the giant recession is a matter of debate.

But surely, cutting the budgets of agencies such as Legal Aid which are designed to help folks who need it, is at best, short-sighted, and at worst, a cynical expression of "let 'em eat cake."