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Editorial: A sustainable solution for Legal Aid

## **A decline in key funding has forced Legal Aid to reduce staff and eliminate services.**

Thousands of Virginians turn to Legal Aid every year for help with foreclosure, child support and other civil cases. Now Legal Aid needs help. Low interest rates have depleted revenues the nonprofit offices collect from trust accounts. At the same time, Congress has reduced funding, and more federal cuts loom next year.

"We've had a double whammy of funding cuts," said John Whitfield, executive director of Blue Ridge Legal Services, which operates four offices in western Virginia, including one in Roanoke. "We're barely keeping our offices open. We're only able to take the pressing cases, and we're turning away twice as many people as we can help."

Legal Services Corp. of Virginia, which oversees offices across the state, reports that overall funding has declined by about \$5 million annually since 2007. For the Blue Ridge region, that amounts to more than \$350,000, or 20 percent of its budget, forcing the agency to cut five of 15 attorneys. Its sister agency, the Legal Aid Society of Roanoke Valley, eliminated an attorney who assisted parents of disabled children in disputes over educational services. Another lawyer who handles domestic violence cases has been retained by draining the nonprofit's reserves.

Several senior Republican lawmakers in the General Assembly attempted last winter to cobble together a sustainable solution to the financial crisis facing Legal Aid, but their efforts were stymied by opposition within their own party.

The most promising reform failed by one vote in the House Courts of Justice Committee. The bill would have given the Virginia Supreme Court the authority to make interest-bearing trust accounts mandatory rather than voluntary. A majority of states already require interest-bearing accounts, which generate no additional costs or paperwork for attorneys or their clients.

Republican Dels. Greg Habeeb of Salem and Terry Kilgore of Scott County deserve credit for supporting the measure. Unfortunately, Del. Ben Cline, R-Rockbridge County, helped to kill the bill, siding with Del. Robert Bell, an Albemarle County Republican and candidate for attorney general who apparently believes his political ambitions are furthered by being tough on those whose only crime is being poor.

Senate Majority Leader Thomas Norment, R-James City County, managed to secure \$1 million annually in stopgap funding, but only for two years. State legislators must revisit the issue when they return to the Capitol in January. This time, they shouldn't settle for anything less than a long-term fix.

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