

Legal Justice – Only If You Can Afford It?

<http://www.publicnewsservice.org/index.php?/content/article/24102-1>

January 6, 2012

Legal Justice – Only If You Can Afford It?

January 6, 2012

RICHMOND, Va. - From veterans facing foreclosure to domestic violence victims in need of protection, the number of people who qualify for legal assistance in Virginia is on the rise. Legal Aid offers services that help people who can't afford to pay hefty attorney fees to better navigate the often-complex legal system. At the same time, the system is losing some of the funding necessary to provide these services.

Mark Braley is executive director of the *Legal Services Corporation of Virginia*, which oversees funding of such programs throughout the Commonwealth. He says Virginia's Legal Aid services have endured \$6 million in cuts from government and private funders since 2008, including a \$1.2 million federal funding decrease that took effect on January 1.

"We're probably going to have to lay off upwards of 20 attorneys and probably another ten support staff – so, that will just have a huge, negative impact on our ability to help folks in dire financial stress."

One attorney whose job is on the line is Nora Mahoney of *Blue Ridge Legal Services* in Winchester. Mahoney's specialty is domestic violence-related issues for victims in the Northern Shenandoah Valley; she says she always has 35 to 50 active clients. Given the sensitivity of these cases, she worries that domestic violence victims will have nowhere else to turn.

"If I'm laid off, and if the other staff that are slated to be laid off go as well, the remaining staff would not be able to handle those kinds of cases. It's really kind-of a question of whether Virginia wants more victims of domestic violence, or more survivors."

The widening gap between the wealthy and the poor in society should not be reflected in the courtroom, adds Braley.

"The foundation of any great democracy is the justice you can achieve in its legal system, and whether the playing field is level for everybody, regardless of your economic status. Everybody should have access to the same legal system and the same ability to represent and protect their rights."

He says advocates are working on proposals to replenish funds and will present them to the General Assembly. They include increasing civil court filing fees, and strengthening Virginia's program that funds Legal Aid through interest earned by client money held in trust by lawyers.

Monique Coppola, Public News Service - VA