

Posted December 27, 2011 |

## State legal aid agency faces funding cuts

### Organization could lose attorneys, support staff because of congressional reductions

By Alex Bridges -- abridges@nvdaily.com

A statewide agency that gives legal aid to the poor faces layoffs as a result of congressional funding cuts.

Representatives with Legal Services Corp. of Virginia said Friday they plan to ask the General Assembly to help restore funds lost this fall when Congress reduced grants by 15 percent, according to a news release.

The agency provides funding and oversight of the state's legal aid system -- nine direct-service programs in 38 offices statewide and the Virginia Poverty Law Center, which assists with advocacy, education and litigation support.

Statewide the agency faces losing 20 attorneys and 10 support staff, according to legal services group's executive director, Mark D. Braley.

Blue Ridge Legal Services in Harrisonburg, which covers the Northern Shenandoah Valley, cut three of its 26 staff members earlier in the year when Congress cut the state agency's funding by 4 percent, Executive Director John Whitfield said. The board of directors plans to cut another five positions, bringing the total staff to 18, according to Whitfield. The agency could reduce its "skeletal staff" in its Winchester office from five to three employees by cutting a domestic violence attorney and an intake paralegal, Whitfield said.

But the legal aid system plans to lobby the legislature to pass a filing fee bill to help restore lost funding.

"We need that to go through for our staff to be saved," Whitfield said. "If that fails then we have to lay off staff, and that's what our board's already basically decided."

Similar situations are occurring in the agency's other offices across the state.

Congress cut Blue Ridge Legal Services funding by about \$60,000 in April, then by \$116,000, effective in January.

"When the first cut came we thought, well, let's just wait and see what happens and we'll just try to run a deficit because we don't want to do anything drastic if we can help it,"

Whitfield recalled. "But when the second cut came in November it's like, shoot, we're drowning now. We're getting clobbered here."

Blue Ridge Legal Services could close local branches.

"Our offices now are gonna be so skeletal that ... we're wondering whether or not we can keep all four offices open," Whitfield said. "Any more cuts, if we don't get some relief, maybe we'll have to close the Winchester office and close the Lexington office and just have an office in Roanoke and Harrisonburg.

"I know that will be a farce for the people who aren't close by; we're not going to really be able to help them, and I know that but I don't know what Congress wants us to do."

Representatives in the legal aid system in Virginia blames a bad economy for the financial problems.

Interest paid on attorneys' trust accounts formed the financial "backbone" for the statewide agency but funding fell as rates dropped, according to the release. Also, legal aid has lost about \$1 million since 2008 in private and public sources and revenue from court filing fees.

Legal Services Corp. plans to ask the General Assembly to pass legislation requiring attorneys pay into legal aid, as is the case in 44 other states. The practice is voluntary in Virginia. But the legal aid agency representatives see this initiative only as a long-term remedy because it would take years for interest rates to rise and money to accrue.

Copyright © The Northern Virginia Daily | nvdaily.com | 152 N. Holliday St., Strasburg, Va. 22657 | (800) 296-5137