

Valley's legal services facing big cuts

The Valley's lawyers of last resort are already so busy they can't serve everyone who needs them — and now they are facing funding cuts that could force layoffs.

Congressional action in mid-November reduced federal funding for civil legal services to low-income residents by 15 percent. This cut came on the heels of an earlier 4 percent cut in federal funding in April, sparking Blue Ridge's first round of cuts, halving the number of attorneys at its Harrisonburg office, which serves Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County, said John Whitfield, executive director and general counsel for the organization.

For many low-income residents in the Shenandoah Valley and Roanoke, Blue Ridge Legal Services is the only option for access to the judicial system.

But although Blue Ridge served more than 2,500 people in 2011, the agency turned away twice that many.

"We're so overwhelmed with people requesting our services," Whitfield said.

And 2012 may see fewer than 2,000 served, Whitfield said, as the organization faces a \$180,000 budget deficit and the prospect of laying off five of its 23

remaining employees.

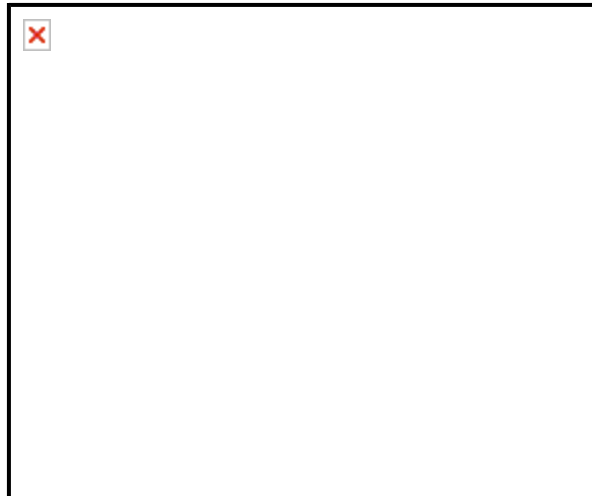
"It makes a mockery of equal justice under law," Whitfield said. "Without a lawyer you're really lost in the judicial system. That's why people hire lawyers. But what if you can't?"

The Harrisonburg office, now down to three attorneys, won't face further cuts, but the Winchester office will be reduced from three attorneys to two, the Roanoke office will lose two support staff and the office in Lexington will go from two full-time attorneys to one and half.

"Basically this means fewer clients get helped," Whitfield said. "A lot more people get locked out of our system of justice."

Blue Ridge Legal Services has been providing civil legal services, such as domestic disputes, divorce, bankruptcy and debt, eligibility for government benefits, access to health care, consumer disputes and issues affecting seniors, since 1977.

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

To qualify for services a person must live within the coverage area, meet income requirements and be filing a suit with no money attached to it.

Whitfield said the organization has always screened those who qualified for services for high, medium and low priority.

The agency used to be able to serve high, medium and low priority clients, but due to cuts in recent years can only serve those with serious legal needs such as someone needing a protective order in a domestic violence case or someone being turned out of their home.

Even those cases will have to be pared down after cuts are made.

The five employees who could be laid off have been notified and the only potential staying power could come from the General Assembly.

Whitfield said he's hoping the organization can get legislation passed in the coming session which will raise the civil filing fee by \$4, generating an estimated \$3.2 million in additional revenue statewide for legal aid programs, and enough to make up the \$180,000 deficit Blue Ridge is facing.

The legislation will be introduced as budget amendments by Del. David Albo, R-Fairfax County, and state Sen. Thomas Norment, R-Williamsburg.

Whitfield is meeting with local legislators next week in the hopes of garnering support for the legislation.

They should know by mid-March whether the legislation passes. If it does, layoffs will not be necessary. If it is voted down the agency's board directed Whitfield to give the affected employees a 60-day notice of termination.

Although hoping for the best, Whitfield has considered what the agency would do if the legislation is voted down and they are faced with further cuts.

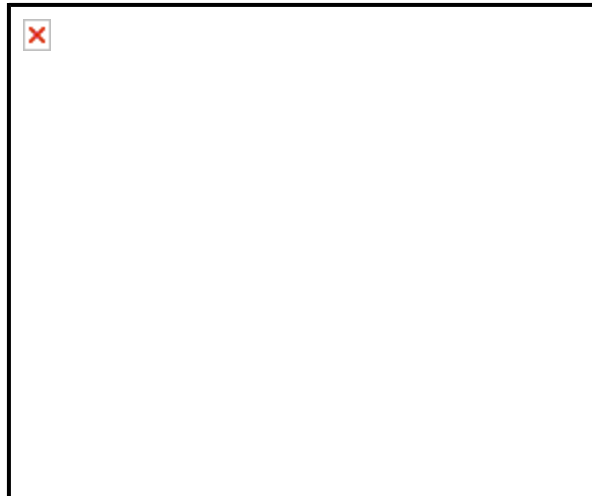
Having pared down the budget so much already, the next thing that will have to go are offices, Whitfield said.

"We're certainly hoping to avoid that," he said. "Some of our offices are getting so small."

Closing offices would leave low-income residents in areas in the Shenandoah Valley and Roanoke without civil legal services.

"It's a serious concern," Whitfield said.

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

President Reduces Amount Homeowners Owe AdChoices

Ads by Pulse 360

Virginia Homeowners are using this ridiculously easy trick to pay off their homes in half the time.

Consumerinquire.com

Mortgage Rates Hit 2.75%

If you owe less than \$729k, you probably qualify for 3.1% APR Govt Refi Programs

www.MortgageRatesExperts.com

Virginia: 50 Year Old Mom Looks 30!

"Her Clever \$5 Wrinkle Therapy Angers Botox Doctors. We Reveal How"

consumerlifestyletrends.com/

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™