

Hope Remains for State to Restore Legal Services Money

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Leaders in the Wisconsin's legal services community say they still do not know whether any money will be restored into the state's budget to pay for those who need representation for civil cases.

But it remains a top priority.

"Certainly it's a major goal for our organization to restore that major funding," Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission President Jim Gramling said. "It's always easier to fund a new program, even one as valuable as ours, when revenues exceed expenses."

Prior to 2011, the state provided money for civil legal services grants through a \$4 portion of a \$21.50 Justice Information Surcharge, which is paid with some court filings. Between 2010 and 2011, that surcharge provided \$2,546,100 for legal services grants, according to a report by the state's Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

But in 2011, the Legislature and Gov. Scott Walker reallocated the money, effectively eliminating it from the budget. Democratic legislators on the Joint Finance Committee tried to restore the money in that budget, as well as for the 2013-15 budget, but did not succeed.

Legal aid proponents say these cuts – as well as less money coming in from attorney trust account interest that also pays for grants – have led to fewer services that many in the state need.

Gramling said he thinks restoring the money may be a hard sell during the upcoming 2015-17 budget push, especially with recent news of a possible budget shortfall due to uncollected taxes. But he also said it is still a bit early to start mapping out the legislators that need to be contacted.

State Rep. Jon Richards, D-Milwaukee, whose term concludes this year, said he remains hopeful. Richards was one of the legislators who pushed to restore the money during the most recent budget negotiations.

Legal Action of Wisconsin Inc. Executive Director David Pifer said he doesn't "have a clear indication" what the next budget will hold.

According to an August report from the American Bar Association, 80 percent of 222 self-help legal centers surveyed nationwide rely on public money to operate.

In particular, according to the report, 47 percent of the surveyed clinics said their budget primarily was provided by the courts. Another 11 percent said their primary source of money was from a county.

In contrast, only 2 percent of respondents said their clinics primarily were supported by private grants, with the rest coming from educational institutions or other supporters.

Only one clinic from Wisconsin replied to the survey, though it was not immediately clear which one. Wisconsin has several legal clinics, the largest of which are ones in Milwaukee and Madison that are run by the state's law schools.

The Milwaukee Justice Center, located in the county's courthouse, gets some money from Milwaukee County's budget, but primarily relies on money from the Marquette University Law School and private donors.

Gramling said he was surprised to hear so many clinics nationwide are publicly funded.

Though Wisconsin's clinics are not part of the survey's nationwide majority receiving public money, he said the need for such services continues to grow here, as it does on a national level.

"Ideally," Gramling said, "it would be marvelous to see those centers spread around the state, in courthouses big and small."