



FILED

DEC 17 2024

CLERK OF SUPREME COURT  
OF WISCONSIN

December 13, 2024

Clerk of Supreme Court  
Attention: Deputy Clerk-Rules  
P.O. Box 1688  
Madison, WI 53701-1688

RE: Petition 24-05 Adjustment to Attorney Assessment for Public Interest Legal Services Funding

Dear Chief Justice Ziegler and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court:

I am writing on behalf of Kids Matter Inc. in support of Petition 24-05 to increase the Public Interest Legal Services Fund (PILSF) assessment. As an organization, Kids Matter is dedicated to protecting vulnerable children, particularly children in foster and kinship care and their caregivers. We believe that increasing access to civil legal aid is vital to the stabilization and dignity of our communities. This Petition is an important step in that direction.

An individual's ability to access civil legal aid can be lifesaving. Civil legal aid keeps children safe with family members without having to enter foster care when possible. Civil legal aid keeps people in their homes and in family-sustaining jobs, empowers individuals and families by resolving consumer debts and ensuring rightful access to income supports, secures support for and protects the rights of crime victims, and helps to extricate survivors of domestic violence from unsafe situations so they can achieve independence and thrive.

Access to civil legal aid, however, is distressingly difficult. While one in seven Wisconsinites are eligible for civil legal aid, only 7% of the civil legal problems facing Wisconsin's low-income residents receive any legal help. The gap between the need for services and their availability holds families back from achieving safety, stability, and economic security. At Kids Matter, we understand that increasing the PILSF assessment is one critical mechanism for increasing access to civil legal aid for the population we serve.

Kids Matter represents and advocates for the rights and best interests of children who have experienced violent crime and sexual; abuse, including children who have lost a parent or caregiver to domestic violence homicide. Often overlooked is the stark reality that children who have lost their parent or caregiver as a victim of violent or other serious crime, or when a child has been sexually abused in the home, children need new families and caregivers. Most often, child protective services do not intervene when children are impacted by homicide. Today, most children who have an available family member to take them in are diverted from formal foster care, even in cases of sexual abuse.

Our civil legal aid services are a primary resource for child crime victims when they need a new legal guardian to protect them, and when their rights have been violated. We ensure that crime victims have a voice in the courtroom and in determining their path forward. Further, our civil legal aid services help protect survivors' freedom and independence by safeguarding safety and privacy, creating safety plans, obtaining restraining orders and providing representation in children's court, and providing information about their rights. Sadly, we also know that for every survivor who can access civil legal help, many more cannot because chronic underfunding has left civil legal aid providers without enough resources to meet the full need.

Kids Matter is often providing civil legal services to victims of crime that crosses generations. While our name is Kids Matter, we represent senior citizens who are taking in grandchildren and who have experienced elder abuse or financial exploitation. Victims of abuse or crimes do not have a right to a free attorney. This can leave many older adults with nowhere to turn if they are being physically or financially harmed, even though the consequences of victimization can be devastating. In 2022, there were more than 9,600 reported incidents of elder abuse or neglect in Wisconsin, and nearly a quarter of the reports complained of financial exploitation—a growing trend across the state. Our senior citizen clients are being asked to be the cornerstones in their families and communities by taking in vulnerable children, all while also experiencing higher rates of financial exploitation. Increasing funds to civil legal aid would allow senior victims of crime to maintain their dignity and safeguard the assets they have worked for their entire lives.

There are far more low-income Wisconsinites with civil legal problems than there are legal aid lawyers to serve them, and many of those individuals face multiple concurrent civil legal problems. An investment in civil legal aid is an investment in justice and in the future health of Wisconsin's legal system. Supporting an increase in the PILSF assessment ensures due process for every Wisconsinite and recognizes the integral role of the legal profession in closing the justice gap. We are grateful that the legal community generously shares in this responsibility.

Therefore, we strongly urge you to adopt Petition 24-05 to increase the PILSF assessment, which would increase the provision of civil legal services to low-income Wisconsinites. The positive impact of the Petition would reach far beyond the financial value of the assessment itself. Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to comment on this proposed rule.

Sincerely,



Susan Conwell, J.D.  
Executive Director