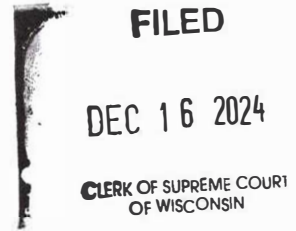


December 12, 2024

Clerk of Supreme Court
Attention: Deputy Clerk – Rules
PO Box 1688
Madison, WI 53701-1688



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

To the Justices of the Supreme Court of Wisconsin:

I am writing in support of Petition 24-05 to increase the Public Interest Legal Services Fund (PILSF) assessment. I have dedicated over five decades of my life to the legal system in Wisconsin and I believe everyone deserves access to justice and 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.

I am an enrolled member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians and have dedicated much of my life to developing and growing the expertise of Wisconsin's tribal judges through my involvement in the Wisconsin Tribal Judges Association, Tribal Law and Order Act Advisory Committee, the Tribal Law and Policy Institute, and more. I currently serve as the Vice President of the Board of Directors for the Tribal Law and Policy Institute in West Hollywood, CA, and hold the esteemed position of Board Chair for Judicare Legal Aid. Since 2017, my involvement with the Judicare board of directors has given me a unique insight into the benefits of civil legal aid, and the overwhelming need for services faced by Wisconsin's low-income and tribal communities.

From my experiences as a sheriff's deputy, clerk of municipal court, Chief Judge of the Stockbridge-Munsee Tribal Court, and peacemaking advisor and trainer, I have seen how critical access to civil legal aid can be in someone's life. Civil legal aid keeps people in their homes and in family-sustaining jobs. It can empower individuals and families by resolving consumer debts. Access to justice protects the rights of victims of crime and can help extract survivors from domestic abusive situations before they escalate.

Access to legal help is distressingly difficult, particularly for low-income Wisconsinites. While one in seven Wisconsin residents are financially eligible for civil legal aid, legal aid providers are only able to provide help for 7% of the civil legal problems faced by Wisconsin's low-income residents. The gap between the need for services and their availability holds individuals and families back from achieving safety, stability, and economic security. I understand that increasing the Public Interest Legal Services Fund is one critical mechanism for increasing access to civil legal aid for our community and all of Wisconsin.

As Board Chair, I have seen Judicare Legal Aid work closely with civil legal aid providers to help victims of crime survivors navigate the legal system. The civil legal aid providers they work with help mutual clients enforce their rights in the legal system and ensure their voice is heard in a court, where many processes are complicated and where the process is often manipulated by offenders. When legal aid providers can work together, they can equip victims of crime with the tools to find a path forward to secure a safer future for themselves and their families. Judicare's partnerships with legal aid providers are important in providing wraparound support for survivors, with legal partners providing legal advice and representation with critical legal issues. Sadly, I know that for every survivor that can access civil legal help, many more survivors cannot, due to chronic underfunding of civil legal aid.

Judicare Legal Aid also works closely with civil legal aid providers to help older Wisconsinites understand their rights and legal options in elder abuse cases. In

2022, there were more than 9,600 reports of elder abuse or neglect in Wisconsin. Nearly one fourth of those were incidents of financial exploitation, which is a growing trend across the state. One in seven Wisconsin seniors are eligible for legal aid, however the need for services far exceeds the capacity of civil legal aid providers to provide the help they need. Increasing funds to civil legal aid would allow senior victims of abuse to maintain their dignity and safeguard their hard-earned assets.

In my experiences, I have seen how housing instability can spiral a family deeper into poverty. I also know that the impacts can extend far beyond one household, destabilizing entire communities and creating public health and safety concerns. Achieving housing stability is a key component of breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving economic security. Civil legal aid providers play a critical role in helping low-income tenants understand their rights, resolve disputes with landlords, secure habitable housing, and stay housed. Unfortunately, we know that for every tenant who can access legal help, many more are turned away simply due to lack of capacity of civil legal aid providers.

Consumers are also facing the crippling effects of ballooning interest rates, unexpected medical debt, unfair debt collection practices, predatory lenders, and programs that promise to help but ultimately push individuals deeper into poverty. Civil legal aid providers, like Judicare, provide legal expertise that can play a key role in helping individuals resolve consumer debt issues and get back on their feet. Unfortunately, for every low-income consumer who can access help for their civil legal problem, many more are turned away due to lack of capacity.

Civil legal aid providers, such as Judicare Legal Aid, work with individuals facing barriers to finding and maintaining employment. Achieving family-sustaining employment is not only key to helping a family achieve economic security and better health outcomes, but also benefits the economy across the state and in local communities. Civil legal aid providers are critical in helping correct

criminal records, reinstate drivers' licenses, resolve issues with professional licenses, and address other barriers to employment. Again, for every low-income Wisconsinite who can access legal help for their employment barriers, many more are turned away simply because of lack of capacity.

I have also seen the positive impacts on individuals, families, and communities when people are able to access and maintain the government assistance, for the most basic things like food, shelter, and healthcare. Each program has its own complex web of eligibility guidelines, rules, timelines, and policies. Civil legal providers work with individuals to navigate through the complexities so they can get the necessary assistance. Their work ranges from unemployment compensation to BadgerCare, from FoodShare to Disability benefits, and more. We know that we are not providing legal assistance to all in need because of lack of sufficient funding.

In Wisconsin there are far more citizens with civil legal problems than there are lawyers to help them. An investment in civil legal aid is an investment in justice. Supporting an increase in PILSF will move us toward a future where access to justice is equal for everyone.

Therefore, I urge you to adopt Petition 24-05 to increase the PILSF assessment fee, which would increase the provision of civil legal services to low-income Wisconsinites.



Judge David D Raasch (retired)
De Pere, WI 54115