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DEC 17 2024

CLERK OF SUPREME COURT
OF WISCONSIN

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 Fund

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

I am writing on behalf of the Center for Veterans Issues, Inc in support of Petition 24-05 to increase the Public Interest Legal Services Fund (PILSF) assessment. As an organization, our mission is to provide housing and supportive services to help improve the quality of life for ALL Veterans, their families, and the communities in which they live and serve. 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 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 [ORGANIZATION NAME], we understand that increasing the PILSF assessment is one critical mechanism for increasing access to civil legal aid for the population we serve.

DV/CRIME VICTIMS GROUPS: Our organization depends on civil legal aid providers to help the survivors of violence that we represent. Civil legal aid providers seek recourse for crime victims when their rights have been violated and ensure that crime victims have a voice in the courtroom and in determining their path forward. Further, civil legal aid providers help protect survivors' freedom and independence by safeguarding safety and privacy, creating safety plans, obtaining restraining orders and providing representation in family court, and providing information about their rights. Our partnership with civil legal aid providers has been a key component to ensuring survivors are able to be made whole following abuse. 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.

ELDERABUSE GROUPS: 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 organization depends on civil legal aid providers to help elderly victims of crime or abuse understand their legal rights and

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obtain justice for the crimes or financial exploitation they have endured. One in seven Wisconsin seniors are eligible for civil legal aid, which far outpaces the capacity of legal aid to provide representation. Increasing funds to civil legal aid would allow senior victims of crime to maintain their dignity and safeguard the assets they've worked for their entire lives.

HOUSING ADVOCATES GROUPS: At our organization, we understand that housing instability can spiral a family into the depths of poverty. We also understand that it is not just an individual problem—housing instability can destabilize entire communities, creating public health and safety concerns. Contrarily, achieving housing stability is a key component of breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving economic security. We depend on our civil legal aid partners to help low-income tenants understand their rights as renters, foster productive communications between landlords and tenants, avoid evictions through legal defense, ensure that inhabitable conditions are properly repaired, and help tenants navigate the variety of civil legal issues that arise as a low-income renter. Unfortunately, we know that for every tenant who can access representation for their civil legal problem, many more must be turned away simply due to lack of capacity.

CONSUMER ADVOCATES GROUPS: Too often at our organization, we have seen consumers injured—by ballooning interest rates, unexpected medical debt, unfair debt collection practices, consumer businesses that skirt the law, and programs or companies that promise to help stretch pennies but that ultimately serve to spiral individuals deeper into poverty. We depend on our civil legal aid partners to provide the expertise and representation needed to help individuals resolve consumer debt issues, understand their rights, and get back on their feet. Unfortunately, we know that for every low-income consumer who can access help for their civil legal problem, many more must be turned away simply due to lack of capacity.

EMPLOYMENT GROUPS: Our organization works with individuals facing barriers to finding and maintaining employment. Achieving family sustaining employment not only benefits the economy, state, and local communities, it is key to a family's ability to achieve economic security and longstanding health and wellbeing. We rely on our civil legal aid partners to help correct individuals' criminal records and, when possible, expunge those records, provide municipal court defense, work to reinstate drivers' licenses and provide representation on ticket/forfeiture cases, and resolve issues with professional or occupational licenses. Unfortunately, we know that for every low-income Wisconsinite who can access help for their civil legal problem, many more must be turned away simply due to lack of capacity.

BENEFITS GROUPS: At our organization, we see the positive impacts on individuals, families, and communities when eligible individuals are able to secure and maintain the government benefits necessary to meet their most basic needs including food, shelter, health, and income. We also see the panic when individuals are denied the benefits they were depending on for their basic necessities. Each benefit program has its own set of rules, objectives, and timelines, which can



make a bureaucratic process even more confusing upon receiving a denial. We rely on our civil legal aid partners to assist individuals whose benefits—ranging from unemployment compensation to BadgerCare, from FoodShare to Disability Benefits, and more—have been wrongfully denied, reduced, or terminated; who were overpaid; or whose benefits are otherwise at risk.

Unfortunately, we know that for every low-income Wisconsinite who can access legal help their benefits issue, many more must be turned away simply due to lack of capacity.

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 important role of the legal profession in closing the justice gap. We are grateful that the legal community generously shares in this responsibility.

Therefore, we 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.

Gillian Hauboldt
Comptroller
Center for Veterans Issues