



METROWEST
Legal Services

35
years of
IMPACT

Testimony of Elizabeth A. Soulé, Executive Director
MetroWest Legal Services
Commonwealth Conversations
Newton North High School
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Good evening. My name is Elizabeth Soulé and I am the Executive Director of MetroWest Legal Services in Framingham. MetroWest Legal Services is the civil legal aid office that serves low-income, elderly and disabled individuals and families in 36 communities in Central and Southern Middlesex and Southern Norfolk Counties. I am here to speak in support of increased funding for civil legal aid in the FY16 state budget.

There are over 40,000 people in the towns served by my office that are financially eligible to receive free legal services. Statewide, there are more than a million people who qualify to request such help.

Legal aid turns away 64% of people who request legal assistance due to a lack of resources. In 2014, MetroWest served 2,016 clients with civil legal problems with an advocacy staff of 13. MetroWest turned away over 2,300 clients during the same time period and programs statewide turned away over 33,000.

Legal aid is the only place where those unable to afford an attorney can find advice or legal representation free of charge to help them to gain access to the justice system and give them a more level playing field. Legal aid advocates represent the most vulnerable in our communities in cases concerning basic human needs: a roof over one's head; safety from abuse; the ability to have income sufficient to feed and support their families; educational services for children with special needs to give them the best chance to succeed in life as adults; and access to health care to prevent serious illness and address chronic mental and physical illness.

The recent Boston Bar Association task force report on funding of Civil Legal Aid provides independent objective data showing that money invested by the state in legal representation in civil cases concerning housing, domestic violence and government benefits returns between

\$2-\$5 dollars to the Commonwealth for every dollar of funding given. Not only is legal aid for the poor a necessity but it is a sound economic investment.

24% (or 15 million dollars) of total funding for civil legal aid comes from through the State Budget. Legal aid programs receive funding from a diverse group of state, federal, and private funders and individual fundraising. Despite our best efforts, and in large part due to the dramatic decrease of more than 80% in funding from IOLTA over the past 5 years, we need more. We need more so that we do not have to continue to deliver the painful news to potential clients, the word No, we cannot help you, there is no other place to send you that will not charge you but we do not have the resources. Yes, I understand that you cannot afford a lawyer and I am sorry we cannot do more. Good luck.

We need to do better and do more to protect the legal rights of those who need help the most. In making such an investment in legal aid, the legislature will receive in return more than it gives. That is why we are asking the state to fund civil legal aid in FY16 at 25 million dollars. It is a win-win proposition for all involved: the Commonwealth, legal aid advocates, but most importantly the clients, the thousands of clients who will retain their homes and apartments, the families who will be safe from abuse and start new chapters in their lives with the appropriate legal protections, and poor and disabled persons will receive the government benefits and health care for which they are eligible. It's the right thing to do, it's the fiscally responsible thing to do. Invest in legal aid.