

MY TURN | Access to legal aid must be funded

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By Rep. Drew MacEwen, 35th District

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Right now, a woman is waking up in a domestic violence shelter in survival mode. Battered and scared, she wonders how she will pick up the pieces and move forward. Who will help her file the paperwork in civil court to receive legal protections?

Right now, a family is being evicted from their apartment without notice and seemingly without recourse. They wonder where they will go next. Who will help them understand their rights as tenants?

Right now, a disabled veteran is trying to prepare paperwork to receive benefits and medical care, but his war wounds make it difficult to complete the process. He wonders what his options are and whether there is someone who can help navigate the government bureaucracy.

Right now, legal advocates across Washington state stand willing to help and are waiting for the Legislature to continue to fund their work through the Office of Civil Legal Aid (OCLA) in the 2016 supplemental operating budget.

As the ranking member on the House General Government and Information Technology Committee, which oversees the budget for the OCLA, I believe we should fully fund the budget request made by OCLA so women in shelters, families wrongly evicted from their homes, veterans in need of care and countless low-income, highly vulnerable Washington residents can receive the legal help they need.

For many Washingtonians who can't afford legal advice, the above scenarios end in a legal maze with unanswered questions, mounting debt, and a downward spiral that could have been avoided with the help of an advocate.

In Kitsap, Mason and Thurston counties, which make up the 35th Legislative District, nearly 1,000 cases were handled by the Northwest Justice Project, a private partner of OCLA, in 2015.

This is not just an urban issue, nor is it just a rural issue — it is a Washington issue. Access to justice is not something that is reserved only for the elite or those who can afford an attorney. Access to justice is a basic civil right that should be enjoyed by all Washingtonians, regardless of their income or station in life.

Statewide, nearly \$11 million in legal aid was rendered to those who could afford it least when they needed it most. But with the-attorney-to-client ratio hovering around 1 lawyer for every 11,000 eligible residents, we must address this issue head on, starting with this year's budget request so this program can continue providing services for those in need.

The Civil Legal Needs Study Update, released last year by Washington State University, overwhelmingly shows the immense needs existing in our state. And, as someone who works on the state budget, I can tell you the OCLA is a sound fiscal investment for Washington.

But more than the dollars and cents, this is a critical investment in the most vulnerable members of our community.

The clock is running on the legislative session, and our opportunity to keep the doors open at OCLA affiliates across the state.

Right now, too many people are going unserved. In 2016, we must take the opportunity to change that.

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