



Proposed cuts in courts will take a terrible toll

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A little boy told his foster mom after he had been placed in her home and after his Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) had left, "You know that guy that was here? He has been my friend for a long time. If I go to a new house, he always finds me. That's how I know it's OK."

The "guy" that the little boy was talking about was one of the volunteers serving in Chelan and Douglas Counties as a mandatory guardian ad litem to represent the best interest of children who have been removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse and neglect. The little boy in question had been in numerous homes, moving from one place to the other. He knew he was going to be OK because his CASA worker always found him, no matter where he went. Fortunately, for that little boy, his new foster parents were going to adopt him and give him a "forever home."

In Chelan and Douglas counties alone, more than 70 volunteer CASAs serve children in similar situations. Unfortunately, the CASA program that makes such a difference in children's lives is in jeopardy if the Legislature adopts the proposed Senate budget. Also on the chopping block would be other worthwhile programs similar to CASA.

Tragically, Washington is dead last — 50th out of 50 states — in funding provided to the court system. As if dead last is not bad enough, the state spends only seven-tenths of 1 percent of the state's operating budget on the entire judicial branch.

The Senate's budget proposes a cut of \$7.9 million from the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the state agency for the judicial branch that passes the funding for the CASA program and other programs through to the trial courts.

If implemented, this would result in a 31.2 percent cut to AOC in this year alone, and a stunning 43 percent reduction to AOC since 2009.

The cuts to the judicial branch — a co-equal branch of government — are severe because 64 percent of AOC's budget is either constitutionally protected or protected by the Legislature through provisos. As a result, cuts proposed in the Senate budget will come entirely from the remaining 36 percent of the budget — direct services and pass-throughs.

In addition to the CASA program, these severe cuts would jeopardize court interpreters for those who cannot understand English and would not understand what is happening in court, the state's

contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges who preside over trials involving state statutes, and funding for the clerk's office staff to collect legal financial obligations, a program that bring in millions of dollars for the state and counties.

The House budget treats the judicial branch better, but it would cut \$12 million from truancy funding, which is used to keep kids in school and help families with at-risk children. These children will likely make their way to the court system — as criminal offenders — if this funding is cut and the cost to our community will be far more in the long run.

Our children deserve better than this. The judicial branch deserves better than seven-tenths of 1 percent of the state operating budget. Washington citizens deserve better than to have a court system that is 50th out of 50 in funding by the state.

Tell your legislators to maintain funding for the trial courts and those they serve.

The authors are judges of the Chelan County Superior Court.