

Karen A. Lash
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February 13, 2017

Representative Rob Brooks
Senator Roger Roth
Members of the Joint Legislative Council

Dear Co-Chairs Brooks and Roth, and all Members of the Joint Legislative Council:

I am writing to offer my support for the two bills you are considering introducing that have come to you from the Legislative Council Study Committee on Access to Civil Legal Services: LRB-1263 creating an Interagency Legal Aid Coordinating Council and LRB-0982 relating to Grant Money for Legal Aid.

I was honored to have the opportunity to address the Legislative Council Study Committee on Access to Legal Services. As the former Executive Director of the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, I know first hand the challenges we in government face to ensure essential services especially in our resource-constrained environment. At the federal level we convened the 22-agency Roundtable recognizing that many federal programs can be more effective and efficient when they include civil legal aid, yet too many did not. I had the privilege of sharing with the Committee our experience identifying programs that help prevent homelessness among veterans, get foster children into forever families, and remove obstacles to employment, and working within and across agencies to improve those programs' outcomes by adding legal services alongside other services already being provided. The Roundtable promoted smart and effective programming and spending of already appropriated funds.

I believe the Committee's recommendations similarly promise great progress towards addressing the unmet legal needs of low-income veterans, crime victims, and many other vulnerable and underserved Wisconsinites this legislature seeks to help regain stability in their lives. The two bills in front of you represent truly groundbreaking and innovative strides forward.

Addressing each bill briefly:

- LRB-1263 creating an Interagency Legal Aid Coordinating Council would serve many goals including raising awareness about the role legal aid can play in advancing a wide range of legislative and executive branch priorities, as well as

to coordinate efforts across agencies serving the same populations. Most Americans simply aren't aware when issues they encounter may have a legal solution, frustrating efforts to match people with appropriate services. The Council can elevate the evidence that shows legal aid makes a difference in numerous areas Wisconsin seeks to address from reducing domestic violence to helping people get a job, and that ensuring access to legal aid not only prevents financial hardships for those who seek assistance, it can also conserve public dollars by preventing problems like homelessness or health issues that can be extremely costly and harmful to individuals and the public.

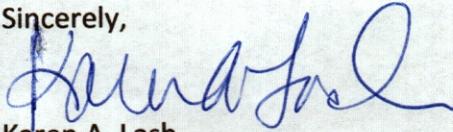
- LRB-0982 relating to the authority of several Wisconsin agencies to allocate federal grant money to civil legal aid would enable your state's legal aid programs to expand their capacity to partner with state and local governments, and Wisconsin social service providers, to together address priorities like increasing access to housing, health care services, employment, education, and improving family stability and public safety. Numerous federal block and formula grant rules and guidance already allow states to include legal services among the services provided. Yet even when the evidence shows the importance of legal aid to addressing an identified state priority – like homelessness among veterans or removing obstacles to employment – that can be supported with specific federal formula funds, too often legal aid is overlooked and underutilized.

To take just one example, Wisconsin's share of the Crime Victims Fund includes victim assistance formula grants. After a comprehensive study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime that included input from state administrators, local victim service providers, and victims themselves, the resulting *Vision 21: Transforming Victims Services Final Report* devoted an entire chapter to the unmet legal needs of crime victims. The Justice Department reflected these findings in the recently finalized rule clarifying that states can use its victim assistance funds for legal services that address, for example, domestic violence, elder abuse, consumer fraud, and identity theft. Tapping into some of the tens of millions of federal block grant dollars Wisconsin already receives can help meet the civil legal needs of Wisconsinites while producing better outcomes and strengthening state agency social service programs and goals.

A vote to introduce these bills on February 15 – and ultimately secure passage – will put Wisconsin on the map as a model for the rest of the country to follow. I hope you will recommend both of these bills with strong bipartisan votes, an action that will amplify your example with other states similarly looking for ways to address the same problems.

Although I am no longer with the Federal government I will soon join a local university directing a project that will enable me to continue supporting efforts to accomplish the same kinds of goals envisioned in these two bills. If I can be of any assistance as the bills move through the legislative process, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Karen A. Lash".

Karen A. Lash

Karen@lash.us

Cc: David Moore, Legislative Council Staff
Rachel Snyder, Legislative Council Staff