

Testimony of Congressman Steve Cohen
Before the House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
February 28, 2017

Chairman Culberson, Ranking Member Serrano, and members of this distinguished subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to testify today about the need for funding for Legal Services Corporation.

It has been said that a right without a remedy is no right at all. A right, however, without a practical ability to seek a remedy is not much better.

That's why we need to fund Legal Services Corporation.

"LSC", as it is known for short, helps ensure equal justice under the law. It helps military families, homeowners and renters, families with children, farmers, the disabled, the elderly and many others across the country. More than 60 million Americans are eligible for LSC assistance.

Our justice system is the envy of the world, but we know it takes professional legal aide to navigate it. If you are poor, or if you have not had legal training – which is most people -- you are not going to be able to successfully work against a private attorney on the other side.

In 2015, Legal Services closed more than 755,000 cases. More than 116,000 of these involved domestic violence. Without LSC, there would be countless domestic violence victims who simply would not be able to seek, much less receive, the justice to which they would be legally entitled.

This is not, and should not be a partisan issue. Republicans as well as Democrats understand the critical importance of legal assistance, not just for individuals in particular cases, but for the fair, orderly, and efficient operation of the justice system.

The Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) of the state Supreme Courts, a non-partisan organization comprised of the Chief Justices and Judges of every state has been a strong advocate of funding for LSC. The CCJ issued a policy paper showing that the large number of unrepresented citizens overwhelming state courts has negative consequences on the effective and efficient operation of the courts. The paper concludes that adequate funding for LSC is necessary to better meet the demand for legal services and to ensure access to justice for all.

This is also not a regional or urban vs. rural issue. Federal funding makes up more than two-thirds of the total legal aid budget in states like Alabama, Mississippi, Indiana, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Idaho.

Lastly, I encourage you to consider how economical the federal government's investment is in Legal Services. LSC's FY2016 budget of \$385 million is less than one one-hundredth of one percent of the federal budget.

We pass laws in this country to protect people from harms that unscrupulous individuals may try to perpetrate. These measures are noble. But if people cannot avail themselves of these protections, then these laws are just words.

Our laws must not just be aspirational. They must be operational. I respectfully urge you to fund Legal Services Corporation.