

Funding for Senior Advocacy Groups a Victim of Budget Crisis

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When Gov. Schwarzenegger vetoed around half a billion dollars in signing the state's 2008-09 budget last September, headlines focused, understandably, on the devastation wrought to well-known programs that provided crucial help to needy seniors: tax help for low-income renters and homeowners, the long-term care ombudsman program and more.

Barely noticed was the elimination of the entire state funding for the statewide California Senior Legal Hotline (SLH), a modest \$250,000 in general funds through the Department of Aging, obtained the year before thanks to dogged advocacy by the whole spectrum of senior organizations in the state.

This "budget dust" had helped save the hotline, a special program of Legal Services of Northern California, after it lost the federal "program innovation" funds grant that had sustained it since 1994. In 2006-07, the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) redirected those funds despite the statewide helplines' success, expressing hope that the "demonstration program," which supported a dozen at a time in nearly 30 states over 20 years, would be taken over permanently by states. Some have provided the needed support to their SLHs, but in other states, programs have folded.

To learn more about this national program and read relevant reports, needs and outcome studies, visit www.legalhotlines.org.

Why is SLH so important?

California's 60-plus population is nearing 6 million, more than any other state, and growing fast. In 2000, the 60-plus group constituted 14 percent of the state's residents and is expected to pass 16 percent in 2010, as the Baby Boom generation accelerates its inclusion among the ranks of over-60s.

All seniors face enormous new challenges due to various factors, including special vulnerability to recession, dramatic changes in health care benefits, public and private pensions; tax and welfare reforms; the affordable housing crunch; deregulation of services; and the growing number of children being raised primarily by grandparents or other older relatives. These factors increase the threats to many California seniors' independence and well-being, already at risk from exploitation and abuse by landlords, dishonest care providers, discriminatory employers, unscrupulous merchants, overly aggressive estate and financial planners, predatory lenders, insensitive bureaucrats, con artists posing as "friends," even neighbors and, sadly, relatives.

California has 58 counties, 33 area agencies on aging (AAAs) and 40 local senior legal services providers (SLSPs), administered by 31 different agencies. The state's size and diversity multiply the challenges of coordination among them. Moreover, the SLSPs vary tremendously in size and geography (urban vs. rural) and in issue priorities. Virtually all of them are understaffed and have gaps in subject matter, areas they don't address at all.

Historically, California has not allocated any general funds specifically for senior legal services programs. Over the past two decades, general legal aid agencies for very low-income Americans, including millions of seniors, have faced funding cuts and increased restrictions on their activities, and federal (Older Americans Act Title

III-B) funds available have increased much more slowly than the elderly population. Particularly in rural areas where there are few options for supplemental funding, services are inadequate. As a result, vulnerable older adults have greater difficulty in securing legal advice, representation and other individual assistance.

The whole idea of adding an easily accessible, high-quality helpline to the mix is to promote an efficient division of labor, in which local programs can focus on cases that require more intensive, hands-on help and preventive community education while the statewide program serves a high volume of seniors who can obtain the help they need remotely. At its previous peak in 2005 and 2006, SLH handled around 10,000 cases a year, more than any other senior legal helpline in the country – though even that was far short of demonstrated demand. Every day now, at least several dozen callers are left waiting and must try again; and full-scale, statewide outreach has never been undertaken, for fear of overwhelming the system.

For more information, see www.seniorlegalhotline.org. Visitors there can subscribe to SLH's quarterly electronic newsletter or contact the program directly.

Special projects abound, at the expense of core service

SLH has diversified in the past several years, developing special projects that address the legal needs of California seniors. Among them are:

- *Pension counseling and advocacy (under another federal grant).

- *Outreach and enrollment assistance for food stamps (now called SNAP), in which California seniors are embarrassingly underenrolled.

- *Education and referrals for seniors about financial planning.

- *A technology project to revamp SLH's intranet into a sophisticated tool for better advocate access to substantive and resource information, most of which will be shared with local senior legal providers statewide.

- *An innovative mediation program, providing an avenue for seniors to resolve disputes before they escalate into litigation while striving to repair and maintain important relationships;

- *Various community education projects, the latest on the scary and sensitive issue of planning for possible long-term care needs – and area rife with abuse involving the sale of overpriced and/or inappropriate goods and services to seniors.

- *SLH was approved as a HUD housing counseling agency in early 2007 and succeeded on its second try to obtain a direct (but small) grant for that purpose, beginning in October 2008. In the meantime, calls for help regarding foreclosures have exploded, and SLH has become a leader in both helping individual seniors and developing new approaches to save their homes when possible.

- *SLH has also excelled at harnessing volunteer power to increase capacity. Retired attorneys and law students are the dominant groups, but other professionals make vital contributions, and for several years now, the program has been a host to two AmeriCorps VISTA members.

While all these projects are valuable and compatible with SLH's mission and operation, they add considerable – and widely varying – requirements for management, data collection and reporting. And while they have helped minimize layoffs and kept the phones open, the hotline's core function – to assist a large volume of seniors with the whole spectrum of legal issues they face – has suffered from the lack of stable, core funding.

The goal: federal-state partnership for stability

The leaders of SLH and its cohorts from around the country are working hard to restore and stabilize federal support for the national hotline program – and there is some cause for optimism. But even under the best scenario, California will likely be shortchanged as it was before due to its size – a typical phenomenon. And nearly all conceivable federal grants require significant matching funds.

A state-federal partnership is therefore the best way to restore and sustain this highly effective, cost-efficient program that with adequate support, would each year significantly improve the safety and well-being of tens of thousands of California seniors.

The Senior Legal Hotline in a nonprofit agency that provides free legal advice, assistance and education for seniors. It provide seniors with fast, accurate advice on any legal subject, by phone and Internet.

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Comments