

Join the Campaign to Increase Civil Legal Aid

All State Bar of Wisconsin members can help in the effort to increase state funding for civil legal services for Wisconsin residents.

BY LARRY J. MARTIN

The Wisconsin Supreme Court will soon consider Petition 24-05, a proposal to increase the court's fee assessment paid by attorneys to the Wisconsin Trust Account Foundation's (WisTAF) Public Interest Legal Services Fund (PILSF).

Regardless of the court's decision, the amount raised by an additional assessment will fall far short of the level needed to adequately address Wisconsin residents' civil legal needs. As the new Wisconsin Legislature convenes, the State Bar of Wisconsin is leading a vigorous campaign for a comprehensive package of proposals for state funding of civil legal aid.

It is time for the state of Wisconsin to get out of the funding basement and make a serious commitment to ensuring all state residents have access to the justice system.

In the 2007-09 state budget, the Wisconsin Legislature included \$1 million per year for low-income civil legal services using state tax resources. This amount was increased to over \$4.5 million in the 2009-11 budget. However, after 2011, funding was eliminated completely. Beginning in 2015, the legislature has approved only \$500,000 every year since for civil legal aid, using federally collected tax dollars.

In other words, for nearly 16 years, the state has not invested any state-collected tax dollars in aiding Wisconsinites to access their justice system.

\$500,000 per year in state funding is near or at the bottom in resources provided by the 50 states. In comparison, State Bar of Wisconsin members, through the current \$50 PILSF assessment, contribute over \$900,000 annually. That's \$400,000 more per year than the state's commitment.

The State Bar of Wisconsin is launching an all-out effort to engage all 25,000 members to work with elected officials to increase Wisconsin's

commitment to ensuring all state residents' civil legal needs are met.

In the coming weeks, look for State Bar communications and action alerts empowering you to personally act and make your voice heard. Through our Government Relations program, we make it easy for you to contact and send personalized messages to the governor and state legislators. We will also keep you informed as to the state budget process and our efforts to secure civil legal aid funding.

In addition, stay current on other issues affecting the justice system, access the Advocacy Network Grassroots Toolkit, and read our monthly e-newsletter, *Rotunda Report*.

We cannot be successful without every attorney member's active involvement. Visit our State Bar Advocacy Network at wisbar.org/GovRelations.

With the state in a healthy fiscal position, there is ample opportunity to address this funding matter. It's time for elected officials to take action for the people of Wisconsin and ensure everyone has equal access to our justice system.

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Stay engaged to help move legislation forward. Learn about the State Bar's Government Relations program, access the Advocacy Network Grassroots Toolkit, and read the monthly e-newsletter, *Rotunda Report*.

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www.wisbar.org/GovRelations

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