

August 31, 2009

Mr. Kurt Triplett, King County Executive
King County Chinook Building
401 5th Avenue, Suite 800
Seattle, Washington 98104



Cc: Metropolitan King County Council Members

Good Day, Executive Triplett:

For the health and safety of our families and our community, we urge you to invest in justice by fully funding King County's legal aid programs in your 2010 Executive Budget. Civil legal aid programs are uniquely situated to ameliorate some of the harshest effects of the economic downturn for King County's most vulnerable residents. Access to legal aid saves county dollars by helping reduce homelessness, unemployment, deficient healthcare, domestic violence, and loss of family income. And many legal aid providers leverage county funding to bring state and federal dollars into the local economy.

The following organizations – members of the Alliance for Equal Justice – work closely together to provide invaluable legal services to struggling King County residents: ensuring their health, safety, and economic stability. And by collaborating with one another to avoid gaps or duplications in service, the Alliance for Equal Justice makes efficient use of funds.

- ★ **Eastside Legal Assistance Program (ELAP)** provides legal aid to low-income residents of east King County and domestic violence victims throughout King County. Compared to this time last year, ELAP has logged almost twice as many calls requesting legal aid. Over the past six months, ELAP provided direct services to 488 clients, as well as support materials and phone referrals to 1353 people (a 61% increase over 2008). Requests for legal aid relating to domestic violence have increased 100% over the past year. In response, ELAP doubled its caseload by recruiting and training additional volunteer attorneys, forming a “protection order” volunteer attorney squad, and opening two new clinics at crisis shelters. ELAP has provided, conservatively, \$177,000 in legal services at no cost to clients. This does not include savings realized by legal aid through stable employment and housing for domestic violence survivors. All of this is possible because of ELAP's \$60,000 in King County funding.
- ★ **Family Assistance Program at Solid Ground** offers free legal help to families and individuals who have had their public benefits denied or reduced improperly by the state. Attorneys provide legal advice and information, and represent clients in administrative hearings, DSHS settlement negotiations, and judicial review. In 2009, the Family Assistance Program received \$25,500 in county funding to assist approximately 650 King County homeless or low-income residents access food, cash and medical benefits. King County directly benefits from these efforts. With this program's assistance, residents are able to access available state funding for essential services and reinvest those dollars in the local economy. If the Family Assistance Program's services

are cut or eliminated, residents will lose life-sustaining benefits for which they are eligible, and place an even greater burden on King County resources.

- ★ **King County Law Library** plays a vital part in the County's delivery of justice services to south King County residents at the Maleng Regional Justice Center. The Law Library is a point of entry to the courts for individuals without legal representation. So far this year, over 66% of the library's daily service interactions involve assistance to members of the general public who have matters pending in court. These individuals seek information on many legal issues, including family law, foreclosures, credit, landlord and tenant, traffic infractions, employment, immigration, and small business concerns. Library staff help individuals navigate the justice system, and support E-filing for the public. To ensure access to justice and efficiency in the courtroom, please fund the King County Law Library at \$157,507 in the 2010 Executive Budget.
- ★ **Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP)** provides legal assistance to immigrant victims of domestic violence in King County, and seeks \$25,000 in 2010 funding. Lack of immigration status is a significant barrier to safety and economic stability for these domestic violence victims. Abusers will often use the victim's undocumented status as a tool of abuse, threatening to report victims to immigration authorities. NWIRP helps victims access immigration law protections that prevent deportation, empowering them to leave abusive situations. Even when immigrant victims are able to escape abuse, it is difficult for them to regain their financial footing because they are not authorized to work in the United States. NWIRP helps victims obtain the right to work in the United States. King County's investment ensures that undocumented domestic violence victims depend less on public services and no longer face barriers to empowerment and safety.
- ★ **Seattle Community Law Center (SCLC)** provides legal aid to some of King County's most vulnerable residents – those who are disabled and facing the reality or risk of homelessness. For the first time, after over ten years of service, SCLC requests funding (\$25,000) from King County. When individuals lose their jobs because of serious physical or mental health problems they often must rely on government assistance in order to meet their basic economic and medical needs. SCLC represents individuals facing significant barriers in their efforts to obtain and maintain federal benefits. The results are invaluable – long-term economic stability and access to health and mental care for a unique and underserved population. By securing federal benefits for King County residents, SCLC puts dollars back into this county's economy.
- ★ **TeamChild** keeps youth out of detention and safe in their home communities, supported by school programs, medical and mental health treatment, and stable housing. TeamChild addresses root causes of juvenile delinquency by ensuring youths' basic needs are met, such as untreated mental illnesses, addictions, learning disabilities, and unsafe living environments. TeamChild is proven to reduce criminal justice costs - for every child receiving TeamChild services, taxpayers save \$4,000. Recognizing the critical advocacy that TeamChild provides, King County has funded TeamChild's work for over ten years. During this time period, TeamChild provided services to over 2,000 youth. Last year alone, 242 youth received legal services from TeamChild because of King County funding. TeamChild, the only organization in the county that provides

holistic legal representation to youth involved in the juvenile justice system, seeks \$275,000 from the County.

- ★ **Unemployment Law Project** uses King County funding to help residents obtain unemployment benefits. Most applicants for unemployment benefits are struggling near the poverty line – they are often low-wage earners, veterans, or suffer from mental health problems. When people get unemployment benefits, they can pay their rent, buy their family groceries, get transportation to job interviews, buy school clothes for their kids, or pay for a visit to their doctor or dentist. Unemployment benefits help not only the individual unemployed worker, but they benefit the worker’s family too by keeping them fed and in their homes. By circulating money from the state to the worker to the local economy, the Unemployment Law Project has a positive fiscal impact on King County.

Legal aid is a smart investment for King County. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions or for further information. You can reach each of us individually, or as a group, by contacting the Alliance for Equal Justice at equalj@ejc.org or 206.447.8168.

Thank you for your consideration.

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