



National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
Office of the General Secretary

November 29, 2005

The Honorable Frank R. Wolf
Chairman
Subcommittee on Science, State, Justice and Commerce
Committee on Appropriations
241 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-4610

The Honorable Alan B. Mollohan
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Science, State, Justice and Commerce
Committee on Appropriations
2302 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-4801

Dear Chairman Wolf and Congressman Mollohan:

As faith-based organizations serving low-income communities, we write today to voice our concern about a federal appropriations law that interferes with privately financed activities of deep importance to our country's most vulnerable families.

The law – a restriction annually accompanying federal funding distributed by the Legal Services Corporation – limits the work that independent civil legal aid programs can do with their own funds that they raise from private, state and local sources. We are deeply concerned that this “private money restriction,” which encumbers more than \$300 million in non-federal funds each year, hurts the families we serve, imposes unnecessary costs, and sets a dangerous precedent for public-private partnerships.

The law closes the doors of justice for many low-income individuals and families who simply cannot afford to hire a private lawyer to help them in civil matters. Our organizations need to rely on local legal aid programs to help people in difficult circumstances resolve problems that can otherwise undermine and even destroy their lives. A legal aid advocate is often a lifeline for low-income families, victims of domestic violence, the elderly and the disabled. We are particularly concerned about the law's effect in denying basic legal assistance to immigrant communities and to all people who are incarcerated.

We understand that LSC has applied the private money restriction by requiring nonprofits that wish to spend their own funds on restricted categories of advocacy to first establish a physically separate office – with separate staff, office space, and equipment. This compulsory physical separation imposes unnecessary costs on financially strapped legal aid programs and creates costly obstacles to private philanthropy.

We are also concerned that this physical separation model establishes a dangerous precedent, more generally, for a range of public-private partnerships. Currently, recipients of federal funds under the Faith-Based Initiative and Charitable Choice programs – like virtually all other federal grantees – are free to use non-federal, privately raised funds to finance a broad range of activities without stringent restrictions like those imposed on LSC grantees. But we are mindful that if the physical separation model for legal aid is imported into faith-based settings (as may occur if the government continues to defend this model in litigation and policy debates), the result would likely undermine our efforts to foster partnerships between faith-based organizations and government to deliver services to low-income communities.

We greatly appreciate your support for civil legal aid and for its important role in enabling thousands of low-income families nationwide to resolve disputes and move forward with their lives. The core values of our faiths teach us to care for society's most vulnerable members. The services provided by LSC recipient programs are vital for this purpose and should not be unwisely restricted. Please continue your leadership on behalf of America's families by removing the LSC private money restriction.

Sincerely,

National Council of Churches of
Christ in the USA
Rev. Eileen W. Lindner, PhD
Deputy General Secretary of
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Pax Christi USA
Erie, Pennsylvania

National Baptist Convention, USA
Reverend Dr. William Shaw, President
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Forever Crowned Ministries
Wichita, Kansas

Evangelicals for Social Action
Dr. Ronald J. Sider, President
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

Latino Leadership Foundation
Chicago, Illinois

Exodus Transitional Community, Inc.
New York, New York

Metropolitan Area Church Council
of Columbus
Columbus, Ohio

Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy
Richmond, Virginia

Baptist General Convention of Texas
Dallas, Texas

New Jersey Catholic Conference
Trenton, New Jersey

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Pastor of Bright Hope Baptist Church
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Heartsong Hermitage
Alberta, Virginia

Austin Interfaith
Austin, Texas

New Jersey Council of Churches
Trenton, New Jersey

Catholics for Faithful Citizenship
Columbus, Ohio

Tulsa Ten-Point Coalition
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Bet Tzedek Legal Services
Los Angeles, California

Lutheran Office of Governmental
Ministry in New Jersey
Trenton, New Jersey

MUST Marietta/MUST Housing
(Ministries United for Service Training)
Marietta, Georgia

High Impact Leadership Coalition
College Park, Maryland

Catholic Social Services
Anchorage, Alaska

New City Kids Church
Jersey City, New Jersey

Victory Center Ministries
Clinton, Iowa

Interfaith Legal Services
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Abe Brown Ministries
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