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LAW BLOG

General Counsel Join Fight to Save Legal Services Corp.

American Express, General Electric among 185 companies urging Congress to continue civil legal-aid funding



PHOTO: ISTOCK

By **SARA RANDAZZO**

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General counsel from 185 companies are joining the chorus of voices supporting the Legal Services Corp., a major benefactor of civil legal aid that's at risk of being completely eliminated under President Donald Trump's proposed budget.

The group of top corporate lawyers, from companies including Google Inc., American Express, Hewlett Packard Enterprise and Walt Disney, signed on to a letter delivered to all members of Congress on Tuesday urging them to continue funding to Legal Services Corp. The nonprofit organization, created by Congress in 1974, distributes grants to more than 130 civil legal-aid groups around the country.

The general counsel urge members of Congress to allocate \$450 million in funds to the organization, which they say "creates a level playing field for the many lower and moderate-income families who cannot afford a lawyer." Unlike defendants charged with crimes, those facing civil legal issues have no Constitutional right to a lawyer, making pro bono services the only feasible way for many people to access the system.

"As lawyers and business leaders, we understand how LSC's national framework provides the basic structure that supports the provision of civil legal services," the general counsel say. They point out that, "Civil legal issues can have devastating, life altering consequences for people who are forced to face the justice system alone," and that Legal Services Corp. money goes toward helping active and retired members of the military, domestic-violence victims, families facing child-custody disputes and small-business owners.

"While we understand that within this fiscal environment difficult decisions about spending must be made, we believe that access to justice is not an expendable luxury but an indispensable manifestation of our country's most fundamental values," writes the group, which also includes the top lawyers at Yahoo, General Electric, Starbucks and JPMorgan Chase & Co.

Those backing the elimination of federal funding to Legal Services Corp., including the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank, say legal aid is more appropriately

addressed at the local level. They also say that Legal Services Corp.-funded lawyers sometimes engage in political issues and face pressure from other donors to do so, a sentiment the organization disagrees with.

The letter follows a similar team effort on the part of 150 of the nation's largest law firms to support Legal Services Corp. Both groups of lawyers point out that their ability to get involved in pro-bono work depends on the existence of the Legal Services Corp., because the legal-aid groups it funds serve as a referral network to send worthy cases to the well-funded law firm and in-house lawyers.

Mr. Trump's proposed budget is still far from final and can be reshaped by Congress.

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LEGAL SERVICES CORP

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