

Attorneys lobby to retain legal aid

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Hoping to preserve state funds, lawyers from across the state went to Beacon Hill last week to lobby on behalf of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corp.

More than 750 attorneys participated in the 11th annual Walk to the Hill, urging the House and Senate to maintain a \$9.5 million allocation to the organization that offers legal help in non-criminal matters to low-income residents.

Their timing was perfect: As an overflow crowd gathered in the Great Hall, Gov. Deval L. Patrick delivered his budget proposal to the Legislature. The governor then made a brief, unscheduled appearance before the assembled lawyers and told them that he had "held harmless" the \$9.5 million earmarked for the MLAC, and urged the crowd to lobby their legislators to try to preserve those funds.

The MLAC's \$15.8 million budget has been hit hard by the recession. Its revenue from Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts has plummeted 63 percent since fiscal 2008, and its state allocation was cut last year from \$11.1 million to \$9.5 million. With a yawning gap between state income and state expenses, the Legislature could look to trim that number even further.

"Just as the demand for legal services has gone up, our legal service staff is being laid off, there are furloughs, reductions in salary," said Jayne B. Tyrrell, co-chair of the Massachusetts Bar Association's Access to Justice Committee. "We are trying to maintain that \$9.5 million and, in light of the incredible deficit, it's going to be very difficult, but we need to preserve this safety net for people."

- Jack Dew