

## Justice isn't recession-proof

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ON A recent day in Boston Housing Court, tenants, sometimes with their children, filled the halls, many trying to stave off evictions. But missing from many of these cases were lawyers who could help navigate the justice system.

Defendants standing alone before judges trying to represent themselves are a common sight in housing and other civil cases, says Zoe Cronin, an attorney from Greater Boston Legal Services. Cronin says that she and her colleagues walk around the court, "grab people," and offer them legal help. Her goal is to provide the legal expertise to keep people out of homeless shelters.

But time is running out. Funding for legal aid programs is drying up, so thousands of people aren't getting the legal help they need. And even Cronin, who was hired in February, could be laid off.

The current financial situation for legal aid is "the worst that I've seen," says Lonnie Powers, who has been executive director of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation since it started in 1983. The corporation does have a welcome \$11 million in state funds. And last year it also got \$26 million from the interest generated by accounts that lawyers use to hold clients' money. But now that program, known as Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts, or IOLTA, can't generate as much money because of falling interest rates. This year's income could drop by 54 percent. So the corporation has made an \$8.5 million cut in the grants it gives to legal aid programs.

As a result, Greater Boston Legal Services lost \$2 million, about 14 percent of its budget. So the organization has stopped taking immigration cases. And executive director Robert Sable is developing emergency plans to raise money and cut expenses, possibly through layoffs that could include paralegals and attorneys.

Neighborhood Legal Services, which serves Lynn, Lawrence, and the rest of Essex County, lost \$1 million, some 29 percent of its budget. So executive director Sheila Casey has laid off five staff members and ramped up fund raising.

Meanwhile, phone calls from people seeking legal help have jumped by 35 percent in the last five months. Among those in need, Casey says, are the "nouveau poor," adults who have lost jobs and have to think - for the first time - about getting food stamps.

Legal aid is the type of "counter-cyclical" service that is most needed when state revenues are at their lowest. When the economy recovers, returns on the lawyers' trust accounts should improve. But right now, government needs to step in to ensure the poorest residents get justice in civil courts. ■