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## 34 legal aid clinics get \$2.4M for those in need

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Not every client who comes to The Family Defense Center can afford the legal fees it charges to represent children and families who are trying to navigate through the child welfare system.

A \$20,000 grant the center received last month will help subsidize lower fees for clients who can't afford it, said Rachel O'Konis Ruttenberg, the center's executive director.

"People of all income levels can receive services from us. We charge legal fees for those who can pay," Ruttenberg said. "Those who can't — this grant will help fill the gap to allow us to serve more of those individuals."

The Family Defense Center was one of 34 legal aid clinics in Illinois awarded grants from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation last month. The grants totaled \$2.46 million.

The foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization established under state law to distribute funding to legal aid clinics. The foundation's board of directors voted in December to allocate the money, but the action wasn't announced until Friday.

The grants "ensure that all state residents have equal access to the justice system," said Richard M. Levin, the foundation's president, in an announcement. "Civil legal aid is a sound investment of state dollars. These programs help to protect families, enhance our communities and build a stronger Illinois."

The \$2.46 million the foundation distributed this fiscal year comes from two sources: the Illinois General Assembly and the Illinois Attorney General's Office.

In a normal budget year, the state typically funds legal aid clinics by appropriating money to the attorney general's office denoted for the foundation.

But the foundation — and most of state government — went without money for more than two years as the result of a political showdown between the Democrat-controlled legislature and Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner.

However, the foundation was still able to distribute funding to legal aid clinics — at a higher rate — thanks to a settlement Attorney General Lisa M. Madigan entered into on July 8, 2015, seven days after the state began the fiscal year without a full budget.

Illinois received \$7.2 million from a joint state-federal \$136 million settlement with Chase Bank, which Madigan then directed to the foundation to fund legal aid services like consumer debt counseling and legal representation.

That \$7.2 million allowed the foundation to keep funding legal aid clinics even without a state budget in place, at the rate of roughly \$2.4 million each year.

The foundation said the \$2,274,882 it distributed last fiscal year to 30 legal aid organizations “provided 21,734 legal information, advice, mediation and representation services to low-income families, seniors and veterans in crisis.”

Once state funding was restored earlier this month, the foundation complemented the \$1.33 million it received from the General Assembly with \$1.13 million from the Chase settlement.

Approximately \$1.1 million of the Chase settlement Madigan directed to the foundation will be available for grants and operations in the next fiscal year, foundation Executive Director Leslie Corbett said.

The Family Defense Center was one of five legal aid organizations who had received funding from the foundation for the first time.

The Evanston-based James B. Moran Center for Youth Advocacy received a \$10,000 grant to help fund the expungement and sealing help desk it operates part-time at the Cook County Circuit Courthouse in Skokie.

“We started the desk in recognition that many of the children and youth we served had parents and guardians who couldn’t get a job, a mortgage ... because their criminal records were holding them back,” said Patrick Keenan-Devlin, the center’s executive director and a juvenile justice attorney. The center has operated the help desk since 2009.

New recipient Community Activism Law Alliance received \$20,000 “to provide family and housing law assistance at three community-embedded sites, according to the foundation.

Working Family Solidarity, another new recipient, received \$10,000 “to provide legal information to the underserved communities of Englewood, Back of the Yards and North Lawndale via extensive community outreach, small group meetings and monthly legal workshops,” the foundation announced.

The last new recipient, Hana Center, received \$10,000 “to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate pro bono legal services to low-income, limited-English proficient and the immigrant Korean-American community,” according to the foundation.

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