



American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin Foundation
207 E. Buffalo Street, Suite 325
Milwaukee, WI 53202

December 12, 2024

Wisconsin Supreme Court
Clerk of Supreme Court
Attention: Deputy Clerk-Rules
PO Box 1688
Madison, WI 53701-1688

RE: Rule Petition 24-05, Attorney Assessments For Public Interest Legal Services

Dear Chief Justice Ziegler and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court:

I am writing on behalf of the ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation, Inc. in support of Rule Petition 24-05 proposing an increase in the attorney assessments for public interest legal services.

The ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that, among other activities, provides legal services in very limited circumstances involving the violation of an individual's civil rights and liberties across the state. Despite the very limited number of cases we are able to take on, we receive more than 3000 requests for legal assistance every year from individuals, often with legitimate claims and grievances. Our organization strives to provide at least some level of resources or referrals to every person seeking assistance, resulting in hundreds of referrals to legal aid organizations every year.

Our communities depend on the services of legal aid organizations on issues ranging from housing and homelessness to veterans services, family and property issues, and so much in between. As several other commenters have noted in their comments in support of this petition, an individual's ability to access civil legal aid can be lifesaving. Civil legal aid keeps people in their homes and in family-sustaining jobs, empowers individuals and families by resolving consumer debts and ensuring rightful access to income supports, secures support and protects the rights of crime victims, people with disabilities, people impacted by the criminal legal system, and helps to extricate survivors of domestic violence from abusive situations so they can achieve safety and independence.

And yet, access to the kinds of legal help described above is distressingly difficult for low-income Wisconsinites, and legal aid cannot possibly assist every person in need of assistance, even if they qualify financially and have legitimate legal issues that could be addressed with the assistance of counsel. Legal Aid budgets are becoming tighter and tighter even as expenses increase, making it more difficult for those organizations to pay competitive wages and to maintain current staffing levels. In order to prevent this problem from getting worse, it is imperative that these organizations be adequately funded.

Considering the broad inflationary pressures across the country, it is necessary that legal aid organizations have additional funding. As the petition notes, the original assessment adopted in 2005 has never been increased for inflation resulting in a loss of purchasing power of the current assessment of almost 40% since that time. An amendment to Supreme Court Rule 13.045 to increase the annual assessment of attorneys for the Public Interest Legal Services Fund is necessary to address this problem. Accordingly, we request that the Court grant the petition and adopt the proposed amendment as stated in the petition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Melinda Brennan", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Melinda Brennan
Executive Director
ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation, Inc.