

Proposal to cut legal aid fund under scrutiny

American Bar Association leader speaks at luncheon

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ASHEVILLE — Bill Robinson believes that equal access to the judicial system is crucial to democracy.

That's why the president-elect of the American Bar Association is concerned about a proposal in Congress to slash funding for legal services for the poor.

“The proposed cuts to legal services are going to hurt the most vulnerable citizens in our society,” Robinson said. “What has defined us as a constitutional democracy has been access to justice.

“If our most vulnerable citizens can't get access to justice, access to our courts, then justice for all of us is compromised.”

Robinson was here Friday to speak at the annual Junior Achievement Ethics Luncheon held at the Grove Park Inn. He also toured the offices of Pisgah Legal Services, which provides representation and advice for the poor in six Western North Carolina counties.

The U.S. House voted last month to cut Legal Services Corp.'s \$395 million budget by 18 percent. The nonprofit agency provides grants to 136 local legal aid programs across the country.

Their clients include victims of domestic violence seeking shelter and protection orders, families fighting evictions and foreclosures, veterans and the disabled trying to obtain benefits and elderly victims of consumer fraud.

According to Legal Services Corp., the House proposal would result in about 160,000 fewer low-income people receiving civil legal services, the layoff of about 370 staff attorneys and shut down some offices in rural areas.

And tough economic times result in more requests for legal help as foreclosures rise, domestic violence increases and more people are pressed by creditors, said Jim Barrett, director of Pisgah Legal Services, which has 18 staff attorneys and more than 300 volunteer lawyers.

“And as the recovery happens, the last people to feel it are in the lowest socioeconomic category,” Barrett said.

Robinson said a top priority of the American Bar Association is maintaining legal aid for the poor.

“I believe those in Congress who are looking at this issue are conscientiously trying to deal with the debt that our country is facing, the tough economic times that our government is facing,” he said. “They simply don't understand or appreciate how much access to our justice system means to our most vulnerable citizens.

“This is a core value of our democracy. And it's not just legal services. Our courts in this country are woefully underfunded.”

Asheville attorney Larry McDevitt, a friend of Robinson's who invited him to visit here, said he volunteers 200-400 hours a year providing legal representation for the poor.

“We've got so many people in this community that can't afford food, much less lawyers,” McDevitt said. “And I think it's the responsibility of lawyers to help these people. If we don't help them do it, they are not going to have access to justice, to have their rights protected.”