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STATEMENT FROM MELVILLE D. MILLER, JR., PRESIDENT OF LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY, CONCERNING THE POTENTIAL EFFECT ON THE POOR OF PROPOSED STATE FUNDING REDUCTIONS FOR LEGAL SERVICES

Governor Christie’s proposed FY 2018 State Budget recommends a funding cut of \$5 million for the Legal Services of New Jersey statewide system that provides free legal aid in civil legal matters to the state’s poorest residents. The proposal would reduce Legal Services’ annual caseload by 5,000 cases, a devastating impact on at least 15,000 household members who are the clients in those cases. The \$5 million cut would eliminate one-third of Legal Services’ annual State general appropriation, and 20 percent of New Jersey’s overall financial support for the program.

Coming right on the heels of the recession decade during which New Jersey Legal Services funding declined by a net \$25 million, the effect of this further reduction would be simply catastrophic for affected families and individuals. Legal Services stands as New Jersey’s principal method for ensuring fairness for those living in desperate poverty who could not otherwise have the help of a lawyer. There is no constitutional right to counsel in civil legal matters.

The Legal Services system offers at least one office in every New Jersey county, ensuring ease of access for residents and responsiveness to local legal problems. Only the most vital legal matters are taken. That includes keeping families together and avoiding homelessness by fighting illegal evictions, maintaining senior couples in their modest homes in the face of imminent foreclosures based on predatory lending practices, protecting victims of domestic violence, helping recent graduates and their families deal with the crushing burden of unfair student debt,

helping low income families combat unscrupulous practices of slick commercial entities and lenders, and making sure those entitled to assistance from government programs designed to assist the state's most vulnerable people actually receive the help they need. Put simply, Legal Services stands as the shield for the poor against homelessness, family breakup, unchecked hunger, physical safety, and other conditions that the majority of New Jerseyans take for granted.

The recently proposed elimination of federal funding for Legal Services at the national level, currently \$6.7 million, would create a double whammy for the program in New Jersey. The federal reductions would cut caseload by another 6,700 cases, also in these same critical problem areas. Our nation's promise of equal justice for all, under law, would be eviscerated in New Jersey.

State support for civil legal aid to the poor is a matter of both logic and fairness. More than 9 of every 10 civil legal problems of the poor arise under state law, and are addressed in state courts and agencies. Ensuring fairness is a state obligation, a broad public concern, a governmental duty, and – equally important – the clear quid pro quo if we expect our residents to abide by a system of laws and order.

Legal Services has just completed its 50th year of proud service to New Jersey, providing representation in well over 2.4 million cases, and thereby helping more than 7 million clients. Sadly, poverty in the state remains at 50-year record levels, nearly a decade after the declared end of the Great Recession. More people need our help for their overwhelming legal problems – literally matters of life and death – than at any time since the beginning of the 1960s.

The Governor's overall budget message evidenced great concern for those living with minimal incomes. He pointed to important achievements such as the success of Medicaid expansion in protecting the medically uninsured, his emphasis on addiction treatment and drug courts, and his championing of more fair system of bail, a reform for which Legal Services provided support and worked collaboratively with the Christie administration. The severe consequences that the proposed Legal Services cuts will have on low income families seem so inconsistent with those other important initiatives that we must hope clear information concerning the terrible human effects, especially given the imminent major federal cutbacks, will prompt reconsideration. Legal Services will do everything in its power to make certain the Christie administration and the Legislature have full information concerning the harm that such reductions will cause for the poor and society as a whole, and will work with the Governor and Legislature to achieve at least retention of current state funding levels.

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