

March 29, 2023

Senator Nancy Skinner  
Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review  
Committee  
State Capitol, Room 5094  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Assemblymember Phil Ting  
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee  
State Capitol, Room 6026  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Senator Maria Elena Durazo  
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee 5  
1021 O Street, Suite 7530  
Sacramento, CA 95815

Assemblymember Mia Bonta  
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee 5  
1021 O Street, Suite 5620  
Sacramento, CA 95814

*Re: Urgently Needed Funding for California County Law Libraries*

Budget Leadership,

We write to you as a bi-partisan body of Senators and Assembly Members, urging you to include a \$16.5 million budget appropriation for California's County Law Libraries in the upcoming 2023-2024 California State Budget. This appropriation is the same as the Legislature provided in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 budgets, initiated by both houses to assure that the Justice Gap did not widen and that Californians who needed access to legal information were not denied.

Equity in accessing justice in California is a fundamental principle of our legal system and California's County Law Libraries are essential partners in ensuring that access. Every day, County Law Libraries are called on to assist distressed parents fighting for custody of their children, tenants living in deplorable conditions or facing improper eviction proceedings, adults trying to navigate the conservatorship process to care for their elderly parents, entrepreneurs trying to start new businesses, immigrants struggling with complex application forms, people terrified by threats from unscrupulous bill collectors, those barred from gainful employment because they don't know how to get criminal records cleared, disaster victims who have no idea how or where to access much needed aid, and so much more.

Moreover, our County Law Libraries often serve as the **only** resource available to residents who cannot afford a lawyer and would be without legal guidance and support but for their local public law library. County Law Libraries are referred to as the access to justice safety net, as they serve litigants and non-litigants alike, regardless of subject area, education level, or ability to pay. The assistance provided by County Law Libraries is more than can be found in a book or legal database; it is personal assistance, legal research classes for non-lawyers, hands-on workshops, free consultations with lawyers, and a safe, friendly, supportive place to ask questions and find help.

As financial issues become more difficult for Californians, the Justice Gap widens. The number of individuals unable to afford or access legal representation reached crisis levels before the pandemic, and continues to rise, with record numbers of Californians facing significant back rent obligations, consumer debt, evictions, family law disputes, and mental and physical health challenges. The burden on the

courts is tremendous and the individual impacts are debilitating; the stress, strain and time dealing with even minor civil legal matters creates significant health impacts, anger, distrust and alienation. The societal costs of not addressing the need for access to legal information are enormous, especially when compared to the minimal cost of funding County Law Libraries adequately.

Most fundamentally, without County Law Libraries, justice is not served. Judges, attorneys and litigants alike recount that the ability of the courts to deliver justice is completely undermined when litigants do not know how to follow procedure, present a case, or submit evidence. All of these impacts decrease significantly when patrons receive legal assistance and support at County Law Libraries.

From 2009 to 2022, funding for County Law Libraries declined by more than 35%, while operational costs continued to rise and the need for County Law Library resources and services increased. Many County Law Libraries faced closure, while others decreased staffing, hours and materials in an attempt to continue services. In recent years, recognizing the imminent threat to this vital resource, we provided one-time 16.5 million dollar funding allocations to keep County Law Libraries going for another year. We remain committed to making sure that this vital resource is not lost to Californians who are in desperate need of assistance. We need to do this again.

The Council of California County Law Librarians is making what we hope will be a successful request to have the same 16.5 million dollar line-item for County Law Libraries again this year in the 2023-24 California State Budget to continue meaningful, statewide, access to justice in California.

Without County Law Libraries, most people have no access to legal information and therefore no access to justice. Please join us in demonstrating a statewide commitment to eliminating the Justice Gap for those of modest and lower means by including the funds requested in the 2023-24 budget proposal.

Respectfully submitted,

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