

Memphis Area Legal Services director testifies to House on funding crisis

Asks for power to seek fees from opponents

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Originally published 11:11 p.m., October 27, 2009

Updated 01:57 p.m., October 27, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Testifying before a Judiciary subcommittee on Tuesday, the director of Memphis Area Legal Services said his 20-attorney staff has had to turn down 65 percent of poor people seeking help because of a lack of resources.

Harrison D. McIver III told the House Judiciary subcommittee on commercial and administrative law that Congress must provide a "substantial increase in funding" to meet the needs of clients struggling in a bad recession.

Referring to a seven-year effort his office brought that settled a case involving "exploitative lending practices," McIver also asked the congressional panel to consider permitting agencies like his to seek legal fees from opponents. Seeking such fees was restricted by Congress in 1996.

In his prepared testimony, McIver said the Memphis office deals with foreclosures, evictions, health care disputes, domestic violence, landlord and tenant disputes, Social Security and veterans benefit matters, among others. McIver told stories of several clients, using only first names, to illustrate the depth of current needs.

The executive director of the four-county office for 11 years, McIver said the Shelby, Fayette, Lauderdale and Tipton county region suffers with 13.3 percent unemployment and an exploding case load that may reach 10,545 by the end of this year. In 2006, by contrast, the office handled 6,631 cases.

The Memphis Area Legal Services budget in 2008 was \$3.5 million, of which \$1.38 million, or 39 percent, came from a Legal Service Corporation grant. Other funding included \$240,294 from the city of Memphis, \$793,765 from the state of Tennessee, \$367,102 from other federal grants and \$421,179 from private contributions.

The subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., heard from two panels of witnesses Wednesday, including Helaine Barnett, president of the Legal Service Corporation, and Michael McKay, vice chairman of the corporation's board.

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