

# Civil Legal Aid Funding:

## A Policy Tool for Productivity, Efficiency, and Justice

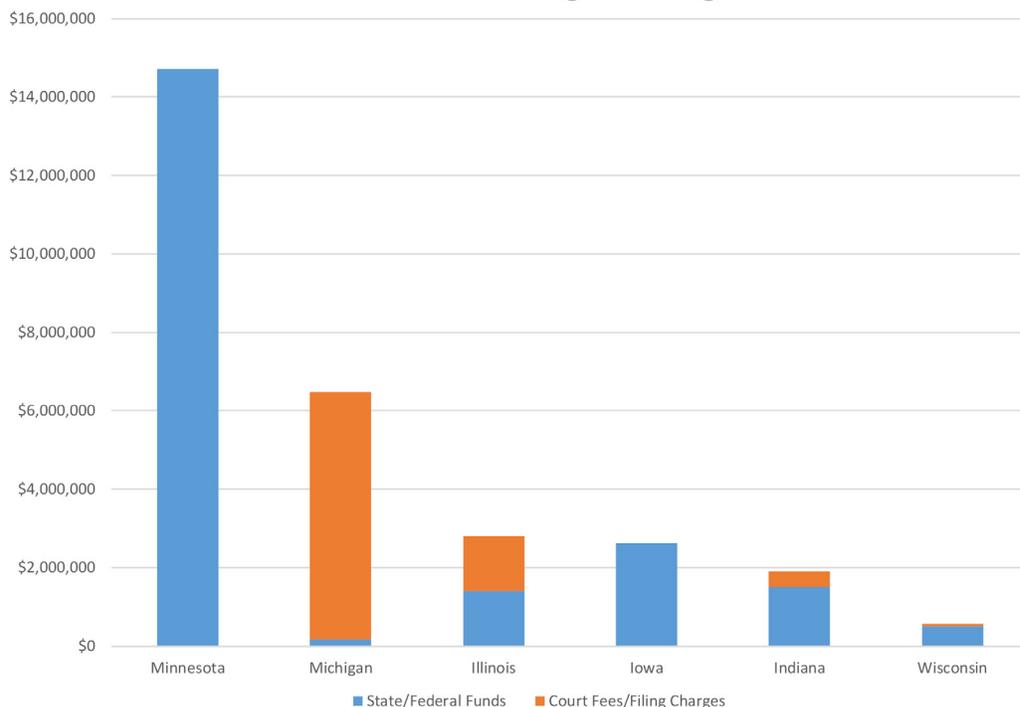
Because the Constitutional “right to an attorney” generally applies only in criminal matters, many Wisconsin citizens are left struggling to address housing, employment, and family law problems. Civil legal aid funding helps ensure fairness for all in the justice system, regardless of how much money you have.

But civil legal aid does more than allow our laws and justice system to function as intended. It helps people get out of poverty and into the workforce — saving money for everyone. Civil legal aid is a win-win policy tool: it addresses smaller problems before they grow and become more costly for state and local governments.

### WHAT IS NEEDED

- **An increased state appropriation is needed to support civil legal aid**, disbursed through WisTAF, using GPR, TANF and other flexible funding sources, would be a powerful step forward for our state’s economy and justice system, allowing more people to become safe and self-sufficient.
- **The \$75,000 cap on grant awards in the current TANF allocation also needs to be increased or removed** to avoid disadvantaging rural areas, where large territories must be covered by only a small number of civil legal aid providers.

Government Investment in Civil Legal Aid in Wisconsin and Neighboring States



Graph shows funding mechanisms with available comparative data. Source: Information provided by state IOLTA programs.





Using grants from the Wisconsin Trust Account Foundation, the official funding avenue established by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, civil legal aid providers assisted almost 11,000 people in Wisconsin with addressing legal challenges and getting on their feet in 2020. **Many more people seeking justice did not receive assistance due to limited resources.**

Research has found **every \$1 invested in civil legal aid yields up to \$15.54 in economic return**, including \$6 in direct public cost savings. In addition, Wisconsin found **every dollar invested brought back \$10 for clients** in the form of child support, jobs obtained, and more.



## HOW CIVIL LEGAL AID HELPS

With expanded access to legal assistance, we can

- **remove barriers to employment** such as expungement and suspended drivers' licenses;
- **help victims of domestic violence** reclaim financial independence and personal safety;
- **reduce the need for public support** by obtaining and enforcing child support orders;
- enjoy a **more efficient judicial system** - fewer self-represented parties means fewer delays;
- **reduce homelessness** and avoid hassles for landlords or mortgage-lenders;
- **protect children** and their caregivers in foster care and guardianships; and
- **help workers** obtain the unemployment benefits they earned.



“We hear from some landlords and tenants that they have been unsuccessful in working out their differences for a long time. **Having an expert there to assist them to come up with that mutually beneficial solution is very powerful, and it works.** It unclogs the court system as well. You get the benefit to the landlord, the benefit to the tenant, and the benefit to the court system.”

— Michael Rust, chief executive officer, Winnebago Conflict Resolution Center, Inc. (WisTAF grant recipient)

