

February 13, 2017

Representative Rob Brooks  
Senator Roger Roth  
Members of the Joint Legislative Council  
Wisconsin State Legislature  
1 East Main St #401, Madison, WI 53703

Dear Co-Chairs Brooks and Roth, and Members of the Joint Legislative Council,

I write to express the support of Disability Rights Wisconsin for two bills that have come before you from the Legislative Council Study Committee on Access to Civil Legal Services:

- LRB-1263 creating an Interagency Legal Aid Coordinating Council; and
- LRB-0982 relating to Grant Money for Legal Aid.

I was pleased to have been invited to present the concerns of people with disabilities regarding access to Wisconsin's civil justice system before the Study Committee.

Disability Rights Wisconsin is the state's Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities. DRW has the authority and responsibility to pursue legal, administrative, and other appropriate remedies to ensure the protection of, and advocacy for, the rights of people with disabilities or mental illness within the State and to investigate cases of abuse and neglect. We serve as the ombudsman for adult long term care participants, and assist victims of crime, violence, and sexual assault with disabilities to navigate the legal system. We provide free legal representation to our constituents.

People with disabilities and mental illness are nearly three times more likely to interact with the legal system, to be abused or neglected, and to be poor. Thus, our constituents have a keen interest in access to legal counsel. The Legislative Council Study Committee on Access to Civil Legal Services was charged with reviewing the need for indigent civil legal aid and identifying additional non-GPR sources to assure that all Wisconsin residents can access justice. All too

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**MADISON**

131 W. Wilson St.  
Suite 700  
Madison, WI 53703

608 267-0214  
608 267-0368 FAX

**MILWAUKEE**

6737 West Washington St.  
Suite 3230  
Milwaukee, WI 53214

414 773-4646  
414 773-4647 FAX

**RICE LAKE**

217 West Knapp St.  
Rice Lake, WI 54868

715 736-1232  
715 736-1252 FAX

[disabilityrightswi.org](http://disabilityrightswi.org)

800 928-8778 consumers & family

often in Wisconsin, legal aid agencies must turn people away because we don't have enough lawyers to help them.

Given the unmet need for legal services, DRW would have welcomed a direct unrestricted appropriation for indigent civil legal aid that included the needs of people with disabilities for legal counsel. Wisconsin is one of only a handful of states that do not provide a direct appropriation for civil legal aid. Nevertheless, the two bills before you represent approaches that hold promise for leveraging and utilizing existing systems and funding to increase access to justice.

The path to economic self-sufficiency and stability for veterans, people with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence and sexual assault is lined with legal problems that require an attorney's intervention. For many low-income people with disabilities, the effort to obtain and retain employment will falter unless civil legal aid assists them to stop unscrupulous lending practices, gain access to employment supports, get a restraining order or divorce from an abusive partner, or challenge discriminatory practices. It is time to fund civil legal aid to address these legal challenges.

Along with our colleague legal services agencies, Disability Rights Wisconsin believes that the provision of legal representation in civil legal matters is not only a matter of fundamental fairness given our adversarial legal system, it also makes great fiscal sense for our state budget. We believe Disability Rights Wisconsin should have a place at the table to represent these concerns.

Both of these bills will move Wisconsin forward to ensure that civil legal needs are recognized as part of a systemic, strategic, holistic conversation about how we effectively and efficiently help Wisconsin's veterans, seniors, people with disabilities, victims of violence and sexual assault, and ex-offenders who are re-entering our communities. These bills can help us increase coordination and collaboration among state agencies around the delivery of civil legal aid, and permanently raise the profile of civil legal aid as part of the solution.

We hope these bills will receive broad bipartisan support.

Very truly yours,



Daniel Idzikowski  
Executive Director

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