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Community uses site to appeal to governor

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In the days before Gov. [Patrick J. Quinn](#) kicks off the state's budget process with the unveiling of his spending plan, Leslie Corbett, executive director of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, has been hoping to go viral with a message to the governor: No more cuts in funding to legal aid providers — please.

That's the bottom line to a message that Corbett hopes as many members as possible of the legal community will post on a [Web site](#) launched two weeks ago by the governor's Office of Management and Budget.

The governor is expected to present his budget plan for the 2011 fiscal year on Wednesday.

Corbett said she reached out to about 300 people — including members of the legal community, social service organizations who also serve the same client base as legal aid providers, and some of her own "prolific" friends and relatives — with an e-mail message urging them to: "Act now to save legal aid funding" by posting comments that would "let the governor know the importance of civil legal aid in our communities."

Her sample message mentions how state funding to the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation was cut 50 percent for 2010 "at a time when legal aid is needed most."

"In human terms, this means 37,000 fewer people will have access to legal aid this year," the message says.

State funding for civil legal aid is appropriated through the Illinois Equal Justice Act and passed through the budget of the Illinois Attorney General. The legal aid appropriation had remained level at \$3.5 million for the past three years, Corbett has said, but was cut in half to \$1.75 million for this year.

That has translated to less funding available to be allocated to the legal aid agencies that have come to rely on the foundation grants as a source of revenue for their operations.

Late last month, Quinn's administration officials announced that for the first time in Illinois' history, the public could use the Web site to provide feedback and suggestions that would be used to shape the state's budget for the next fiscal year.

Since then, the site has seen about 12,000 comments, with many of them addressing calls for reforming the pension system in Illinois, funding for education and tax increases, said Kelly Kraft, a spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Budget.

While Kraft said the budget plan has been shaped for Quinn's announcement on Wednesday, "we're still going to accept comments even after the address."

And while not quite viral, the message about legal aid funding is among the voices seeking to be heard.

Like the message from Maureen Mosh of Oak Park, which borrows from the sample message provided by Corbett.

"Civil legal aid helps vulnerable families, seniors, children with disabilities and veterans meet their basic human needs," the posting says. "State funding enabled legal aid providers across the state to address mortgage foreclosure, domestic violence, elder abuse, veteran's benefits, special education and predatory lending issues for over 74,000 people in 2009."

In light of the cuts in state funding to legal aid providers for this year, the sample message says, "An additional cut next year would cripple the legal aid system already besieged by increased demand coupled with reductions from major funding sources hit hard by the economic crisis.

"Please spare the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation from additional cuts this year. That Foundation funds this vital work."

Another plea to the governor to spare the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation from additional funding cuts appears in the form of a posting from [Ashlee B. Highland](#) of Lombard, supervising attorney at CARPLS.

"CARPLS' Legal Aid Hotline and court-based Advice Desks give low-income clients direct access to experienced attorneys who are trained to quickly assess and respond to a wide range of civil legal problems," the message says. "CARPLS' unique 'legal triage' system serves as a model for legal aid communities across the country and has increased access to justice by dramatically reducing the cost of legal aid services to the poor."

Another message to the governor appears in the form of a posting from [Peter M. Schlax](#) of Libertyville, who serves as president of the Board of Directors for Prairie State Legal Services

"The lawyers who work for Prairie State have willingly accepted their own personal 'budget cut' by joining the organization rather than maximizing their income in private practice," the message says. "These people also work diligently and creatively on their own fundraising to support the organization's mission of helping the poor. Because they achieve so much bang for the buck, continuing their funding by the Equal Justice Foundation is a most worthy and important use of, what I appreciate to be, ever more scarce state resources."

Corbett said her organization had already sent a targeted letter to the governor, himself, "but then we decided our voices should be among those commenting on the budget" via the Web site.

"You give consent with your silence," Corbett said. "If we don't speak out at all, then we can easily be forgotten. Here there is an invitation to speak out, and I think we should accept that invitation."