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State Board of Civil Legal Aid

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<https://www.mncourts.gov/lac>

AT A GLANCE

- Civil Legal Services attorneys, staff and volunteers handle legal matters for Minnesota’s most vulnerable people for no charge. With expertise and compassion, Civil Legal Services provides basic legal protections so clients can achieve security, self-sufficiency, and access to opportunity.
- There is one Civil Legal Services attorney for every 5,564 eligible clients, compared with one private practice attorney for every 203 Minnesotans above legal aid income guidelines.
- 53 percent of clients represented are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, 18 percent are seniors, 30 percent are people with disabilities, and 67 percent are women.
- In 2023, CLS provided legal representation and advice to 47,708 households consisting of more than 114,593 people throughout all 87 Minnesota counties.
- CLS provided education and self-help services to more than 600,000 people counting unique visitors to the www.LawHelpMN.org website.

PURPOSE

Effective July 1, 2025, Civil Legal Services (“CLS”) will be administered by the newly created State Board of Civil Legal Aid rather than the Supreme Court Legal Services Advisory Committee. Planning is underway for this transition, with the legislation directing that court staff currently employed to support the advisory committee transfer to the State Board of Civil Legal Aid upon the effective date. The primary focus of this new judicial branch agency will be to ensure access to high-quality civil legal services in every Minnesota county. The full legislative language related to the State Board of Civil Legal Aid can be found in Minnesota Session Laws, Chapter 123, Article 11 (2024).(<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/2024/0/Session+Law/Chapter/123/>).

The statewide CLS network is a core function of the justice system. CLS delivers justice to vulnerable Minnesotans and increases efficiency in the civil legal system. CLS focuses on resolving civil legal matters that directly affect the basic human needs for economic security, personal safety, shelter, and household sustenance. All CLS clients have low incomes, live with disabilities, or are elderly.

The Supreme Court has administered CLS funding since July 1, 1982, when the legislature created the Legal Services Advisory Committee. By statute, 85 percent of the general fund support is distributed on a poverty population basis to the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition (“the Coalition”), six regional civil legal aid organizations that provide legal representation in every county. The remaining 15 percent of general fund support is awarded on a competitive basis to additional qualified CLS organizations through a grantmaking process.

BUDGET

The State Board of Civil Legal Aid will become a new agency in fiscal year (FY) 2026 and does not have any historical budget data at this time.

STRATEGIES

CLS opens the doors of the justice system to the most vulnerable people in communities statewide. CLS creates strong and stable families and communities by helping people find solutions to civil legal disputes and delivering legal representation and advice. CLS is continuously innovating and expanding the www.LawHelpMN.org website, most recently by redesigning the site to include an online triage portal for people seeking legal help and information. The self-help resources on the website include plain language fact sheets and easy-to-use legal forms. The website is used by the court system, public libraries, social service agencies, and the general public.

Additionally, in 2021, CLS implemented a first -in-the-nation statewide network of technology access points to ensure access to civil legal aid, legal information, and remote hearings at state district courts for all Minnesotans.

CLS priorities include:

- Preserving housing stability and preventing homelessness due to improper eviction or foreclosure;
- Helping victims of domestic violence achieve safety;
- Maximizing the ability of people who are elderly or have disabilities to live safely and independently in their community;
- Ensuring that Minnesotans have health care and financial security; and
- Protecting people from financial exploitation.

An essential part of the state’s domestic violence intervention system, CLS gives legal help to women and children served by the state’s network of domestic violence shelters and support programs. CLS has a similar relationship with social service systems that address homelessness or independent living for seniors or people with disabilities. The CLS partnership with the Minnesota Judicial Branch is also critical. CLS creates efficiencies in the state court system by redirecting cases that are without merit or can be resolved in another manner, and by ensuring efficient use of the courts when CLS clients come before a judge. CLS also creates efficiencies by providing essential infrastructure to leverage and support volunteer attorneys through training, mentoring, and Minnesota Legal Advice Online. CLS has implemented a coordinated intake and referral process, including the statewide toll-free phone number 1-877-MY-MN-LAW, which directs callers to intake hubs for screening and service delivery across all CLS funded organizations.

RESULTS

Measure name	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Legal representation cases closed	Quantity	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	The number of cases closed by CLS staff and pro bono attorneys have increased by 17 percent since 2020, including a seven percent increase from 2022 to 2023	47,708 cases closed in 2023
Dollar benefits achieved for clients	Result	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	The dollar benefits resulting from legal representation of low-income Minnesotans has ranged from \$17,107,754 in 2020, to \$20,280,871 in 2021, to \$19,100,975 in 2022, to \$21,670,805 in 2023	\$21,670,805 in benefits achieved for clients in 2023

Measure name	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Staff turnover rate	Quality	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	After receiving additional funding in 2022-2023 to improve employee retention through salary increases, CLS went from a statewide staff turnover rate of 37 percent in 2021 to 20 percent in 2023. Because the 2023 data did not include a full year with the salary increases included, the board expects to see another reduction in the turnover rate in 2024.	Staff turnover rate decreased by 46 percent since 2021
Outcome measures - housing	Result	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	91 percent of clients in housing cases closed in 2023 were in a better position to keep or find housing
Outcome measures - safety	Result	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	87 percent of clients in domestic violence cases closed in 2023 were physically safer
Outcome measures - consumer	Result	Annual data collection from CLS grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	80 percent of clients in cases with a financial impact closed in 2023 were less likely to be harassed by creditors

Minn. Stat. §§ 480.242 (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/480.242>) provides the authority for grantmaking to the Civil Legal Services network.

(Dollars in Thousands)

	Actual FY22	Actual FY23	Actual FY24	Estimate FY25	Forecast Base	
					FY26	FY27
<u>Expenditures by Fund</u>						
1000 - General					34,167	34,167
2000 - Restrict Misc Special Revenue					10,351	10,347
Total					44,518	44,514
Biennial Change				0		89,032
Biennial % Change						
<u>Expenditures by Program</u>						
Civil Legal Services					44,518	44,514
Total					44,518	44,514
<u>Expenditures by Category</u>						
Compensation					400	400
Grants, Aids and Subsidies					44,118	44,114
Total					44,518	44,514
<u>Full-Time Equivalents</u>						
					2.00	2.00

(Dollars in Thousands)

	Actual FY22	Actual FY23	Actual FY24	Estimate FY25	Forecast Base	
					FY26	FY27
1000 - General						
Direct Appropriation					34,167	34,167
Expenditures					34,167	34,167
Biennial Change in Expenditures				0		68,334
Biennial % Change in Expenditures						
Full-Time Equivalents					2.00	2.00

2000 - Restrict Misc Special Revenue

Balance Forward In						8,746
Receipts					5,049	5,049
Transfers In					14,048	2,312
Balance Forward Out					8,746	5,760
Expenditures					10,351	10,347
Biennial Change in Expenditures				0		20,698
Biennial % Change in Expenditures						

(Dollars in Thousands)

	FY25	FY26	FY27	Biennium 2026-27
Direct				
Fund: 1000 - General				
Base Adjustments				
Current Law Base Change		607	607	1,214
Programs Moving to New Agencies		33,560	33,560	67,120
Forecast Base		34,167	34,167	68,334
Dedicated				
Fund: 2000 - Restrict Misc Special Revenue				
Planned Spending		10,351	10,347	20,698
Forecast Base		10,351	10,347	20,698
Revenue Change Summary				
Dedicated				
Fund: 2000 - Restrict Misc Special Revenue				
Forecast Revenues		5,049	5,049	10,098

State Board of Civil Legal Aid

FY 2026-27 Biennial Budget Change Item

Change Item Title: Civil Legal Services - Maintain Current Services

Fiscal Impact (\$000s)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
General Fund				
Expenditures	8,580	20,258	34,095	50,081
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Other Funds				
Expenditures	0	0	0	0
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Net Fiscal Impact = (Expenditures – Revenues)	8,580	20,258	34,095	50,081
FTEs	2	2	2	2

Request:

Civil Legal Services (CLS), a core function that ensures our legal system delivers justice to Minnesotans statewide, requests an increase of \$8,580,000 to its base funding in FY2026, along with an additional \$11,678,000 increase in the second year of the biennium. The total requested increase for existing CLS grant programs and staff for the 2026-2027 biennium is \$28,838,000. This additional funding will result in increased access, the improvement of legal outcomes and the enhancement of services for low-income Minnesotans, and those with disabilities and the elderly who need civil legal services to meet their basic human needs. The requested increase will be used for necessary salary increases for civil legal services staff to keep pace with other public sector counterparts and to increase the capacity of CLS programs to serve more eligible Minnesotans. The total FY2025 CLS budget from all sources, including the state appropriation, is \$64,550,959. The requested increase (including the second change item request for 2 new FTE for the State Board of Civil Legal Aid) would be 13.7% of all CLS funding in FY2026 as compared to FY2025, and 15.9% of all CLS funding in FY2027 as compared to FY2026.

Rationale/Background:

CLS opens the doors of the legal system and delivers justice to the most vulnerable people in Minnesota communities statewide. CLS attorneys are the go-to experts for resolving the various civil legal problems experienced by people in times of economic crisis. CLS supports strong and stable families and communities by helping people find solutions to civil legal disputes. CLS helps victims of domestic violence achieve safety, preserves housing stability and prevents homelessness caused by illegal and improper evictions and foreclosures, protects vulnerable Minnesotans from financial exploitation, and maximizes the ability of people who are elderly or have disabilities to live safely and independently in their communities.

CLS increases efficiency in the state court system by redirecting cases that are without merit or can be resolved in another manner, and by ensuring efficient use of the courts when CLS clients come before a judge. CLS increases public access to easily understood legal resources by developing, and continuously expanding, the nationally recognized website www.LawHelpMN.org, which serves as a free resource to all Minnesotans statewide. CLS used legal representation to protect or to recover more than \$21,670,805 in child support, household financial support, and public benefits for Minnesotans statewide in calendar year 2023 (most recent CLS case data available).

Effective July 1, 2025, this program will be administered by the newly created State Board of Civil Legal Aid rather than the Supreme Court Legal Services Advisory Committee. Planning is underway for this transition, with the legislation directing that court staff currently employed to support the advisory committee transfer to the State Board of Civil Legal Aid upon the effective date. The primary focus of this new judicial branch agency will be to ensure access to high-quality civil legal services in every Minnesota county. There are two current staff members

who will transfer from the Supreme Court budget to the State Board of Civil Legal Aid budget and their salaries will be paid for through the existing CLS operations appropriation. A separate change item request details the request for two additional staff members.

Proposal:

The funding requested will stabilize the existing CLS program, which provided legal help to 114,593 vulnerable Minnesotans in 47,708 legal cases in all 87 counties statewide in 2023, and incrementally decrease the number of elderly, people with disabilities and low-income Minnesotans who are eligible for CLS who are turned away each year. The intended result of the requested increases is to serve more eligible people and to see improved outcomes for Minnesotans with low incomes needing legal representation or advice to meet their need for safety, shelter, food, health care, and basic income.

CLS partners with the courts, public libraries, domestic violence shelters, social service systems, and volunteers to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. CLS also creates efficiency by providing essential infrastructure to leverage and support volunteer attorneys through training, mentoring, www.ProJusticeMN.org, and Minnesota Legal Advice Online (MLAO). CLS has implemented a coordinated intake and referral process, including the statewide toll-free phone number 1-877-MY-MN-LAW, which directs callers to intake hubs for screening and service delivery across all CLS funded organizations. These collaborative, system-improvement-focused efforts will result in improved and increased access to justice for the Minnesotans receiving CLS.

A minimum of \$9,566,000 of the requested increase for the FY2026-2027 biennium is to maintain current services through continued CLS salary improvement. Increasing CLS competitiveness in compensation with other public sector legal employers will continue to help CLS providers retain key staff to facilitate these important system-improvement activities. The additional \$19,272,000 is requested in base funding to build capacity to provide additional services for the over half of the eligible elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income Minnesotans who are turned away from CLS every year due to lack of resources.

Impact on Children and Families:

CLS stabilizes the lives, health, safety, and well-being of children and families, ensuring that they have the foundational life stability they need to pursue economic, educational, housing, and other life opportunities. Specifically, CLS uses legal advocacy to keep children in the school of their family's choice, which helps with the life stability and mental health of the family. Safe and stable housing is critical to the health and educational success of Minnesota's children. CLS ensures safety and stability in families' homes, preventing illegal evictions and homelessness, which would otherwise disrupt families' economic security and children's education. CLS ensures that children and their parents are safe in their homes, through domestic violence prevention and housing health and safety advocacy. CLS ensures that all children, regardless of ability, have equal access to educational opportunities. CLS secures economic and health care benefits, ensuring that families are financially secure and stable in their lives. In addition to providing legal representation services in housing, economic security, health care, disability rights, and other life- and education-stabilizing practice areas, CLS utilizes its unique network of community partners to connect clients with community-based resources and supports for childcare, food and nutrition, early childhood education, health care, housing stability, mental health services, and other foundational life needs.

Equity and Inclusion:

Minnesotans who qualify for CLS, are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; people with disabilities; the elderly; and veterans. While most CLS providers serve all of these populations and target outreach to them, CLS has specific programs to address the unique legal needs of people with disabilities and the elderly.

In 2023, 53% of clients served by CLS were non-white (26% Black, 13% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 4% Native American, and 6% Other). Equity and Inclusion efforts are sustainable because equity is a core value of CLS and central to our mission and our cause of equal justice for all.

Tribal Consultation:

Several CLS grant recipients provide services in tribal courts across the state. This includes Anishinabe Legal Services, Justice North, and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Law Center, all of which have contracts with tribal courts including Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth. CLS attorneys are also licensed in Fond du Lac, Mille Lacs, and Bois Forte tribal courts. Receiving the requested increase helps address the gap in needed services in tribal communities.

Results:

Measure name	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Legal Representation Cases Closed	Quantity	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	The number of cases closed by CLS staff and pro bono attorneys have increased by 17% since 2020, including a 7% increase from 2022 to 2023.	47,708 cases closed in 2023
Dollar Benefits Achieved for Clients	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	The dollar benefits resulting from legal representation of low-income Minnesotans has ranged from \$17,107,754 in 2020, to \$20,280,871 in 2021, to \$19,100,975 in 2022, to \$21,670,805 in 2023.	\$21,670,805 benefits achieved for clients in 2023
Staff Turnover Rate	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	After receiving additional funding in 2022-2023 to improve employee retention through salary increases CLS went from statewide staff turnover rate of 37% in 2021 to 20% in 2023. Because the 2023 data did not include a full year with the salary increases, we expect to see another reduction in turnover rate in 2024.	Staff turnover rate decreased by 46% since 2021
Outcome Measures - Housing	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	91% of clients in housing cases closed in 2023 were in a better position to keep or find housing
Outcome Measures - Safety	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	87% of clients in domestic violence cases closed in 2023 were physically safer

Measure name	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Outcome Measures - Consumer	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	80% of clients in cases with a financial impact closed in 2023 were less likely to be harassed by creditors

Statutory Change(s):

n/a

State Board of Civil Legal Aid

FY 2026-27 Biennial Budget Change Item

Change Item Title: Civil Legal Services – New Staff

Fiscal Impact (\$000s)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
General Fund				
Expenditures	250	250	250	250
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Other Funds				
Expenditures	0	0	0	0
Revenues	0	0	0	0
Net Fiscal Impact = (Expenditures – Revenues)	250	250	250	250
FTEs	2	2	2	2

Request:

Civil Legal Services (CLS) funding will be managed by the newly created State Board of Civil Legal Aid effective July 1, 2025. By statute, the State Board of Civil Legal Aid “shall work to ensure high-quality civil legal services in every Minnesota county.” This change item request is specific to the two new grant management staff that should be added to support the work of the new independent judicial branch agency.

Rationale/Background:

There are two current staff members who will transfer from the Supreme Court budget to the State Board of Civil Legal Aid budget and their salaries will be paid for through the existing CLS operations appropriation. After review of similar civil legal aid grantmaking structures around the country and the grant management policies set by the Office of Grants Management, the program administrator is recommending the addition of two more staff (for a total of 4.0 FTE for the new agency) to support the efficient operation of the board and the civil legal aid program.

Proposal:

The two new positions descriptions will need to be approved by the board, but the proposal is to post one position focused on experience in nonprofit financial management and one position focused on experience in the provision of civil legal aid. The financial staff person will approve invoices, conduct financial reconciliations, review grantee financial health and other work to support the State Board of Civil Legal Aid’s financial procedures. The program staff will assist with setting program standards, manage the grant review process and conduct site visits to monitor compliance with board policies. With the 2 new FTE added to the existing 2 FTE, the State Board of Civil Legal Aid will have administrative costs of approximately 3% of the total appropriation.

Impact on Children and Families:

The new staff will support the work of CLS statewide. CLS stabilizes the lives, health, safety, and well-being of children and families, ensuring that they have the foundational life stability they need to pursue economic, educational, housing, and other life opportunities. Specifically, CLS uses legal advocacy to keep children in the school of their family’s choice, which helps with the life stability and mental health of the family. Safe and stable housing is critical to the health and educational success of Minnesota’s children. CLS ensures safety and stability in families’ homes, preventing illegal evictions and homelessness, which would otherwise disrupt families’ economic security and children’s education. CLS ensures that children and their parents are safe in their homes, through domestic violence prevention and housing health and safety advocacy. CLS ensures that all children, regardless of ability, have equal access to educational opportunities. CLS secures economic and health care benefits, ensuring that families are financially secure and stable in their lives. In addition to providing legal representation services in

housing, economic security, health care, disability rights, and other life- and education-stabilizing practice areas, CLS utilizes its unique network of community partners to connect clients with community-based resources and supports for childcare, food and nutrition, early childhood education, health care, housing stability, mental health services, and other foundational life needs.

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Outcome Measures - Housing	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	91% of clients in housing cases closed in 2023 were in a better position to keep or find housing
Outcome Measures - Safety	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	87% of clients in domestic violence cases closed in 2023 were physically safer
Outcome Measures - Consumer	Result	Annual Data Collection from CLS Grantees	CLS grantees track designated client outcomes at the end of full representation cases. These rates have been similar year over year.	80% of clients in cases with a financial impact closed in 2023 were less likely to be harassed by creditors

Statutory Change(s):

n/a