

ABOUT THE STATE BAR

Created by the California Legislature in 1927, the State Bar of California is an administrative arm of the California Supreme Court. Its mission is to protect the public and includes the primary functions of licensing, regulation, and discipline of attorneys; the advancement of the ethical and competent practice of law; and support of efforts for greater access to, and inclusion in, the legal system. To learn more about the State Bar of California, please visit: www.calbar.ca.gov/About-Us.

ABOUT THE OFFICE OF ACCESS & INCLUSION

The Office of Access & Inclusion (OA&I) advances the State Bar's mission to expand access to justice and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the legal profession. It develops policies and research to improve access to legal services, shares best practices to strengthen DEI, and administers funding for legal aid and public defender offices serving low-income Californians. Overseen by the Legal Services Trust Fund Commission, OA&I will administer approximately \$313 million in 2025 to 114 organizations, including \$283 million in core funding, twice the amount it distributed in 2024.

Suggested Citation

State Bar of California: *At a Precipice: How Funding Cuts Threaten Justice for Millions of Californians* (State Bar of California, 2025).

For more information about this brief, please contact trustfundprogram@calbar.ca.gov.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This impact brief outlines the consequences of deep funding cuts to California's legal aid system and the cascading effects on housing, immigrant communities, survivors of violence, and rural and inland access. Its goal is to inform policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders about the urgent need to sustain and strengthen legal aid infrastructure.

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I. BACKGROUND



Federal funding is foundational to California's public systems, supporting schools, health care, housing, and critical social programs. It accounts for over one-third of the state budget and sustains services that millions of Californians depend on every day. Cuts at the federal level would hit the most vulnerable hardest: immigrant families, older adults, veterans, low-income Californians, and people with disabilities.

Following the end of pandemic relief programs, California's poverty rate has returned to pre-pandemic levels: **about one-third of Californians, or over 13 million people, are living in and near poverty.** Poverty is highest among adults ages 65 and older, and has risen for children compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. While poverty has increased across all racial and ethnic groups, poverty rates are especially pronounced among Californians of color, with 25 percent of Latinos and 22.3 percent of Black Californians living in poverty.

Legal aid is a vital part of our safety net. Most life challenges—housing, employment, family disputes—are legal problems. The State Bar of California currently funds 114 legal aid organizations through the Interest on Lawyers' Trust Fund Accounts (IOLTA), Equal Access Fund (EAF), and other state funding sources, alongside critical support from federal agencies. One important source of federal funding, the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), remains on the federal rescission list, with the fiscal year 2026 federal budget proposal calling for the nation's largest civil legal aid funder's complete elimination. The proposal calls for the slashing of LSC's \$560 million budget to a one-time \$21 million in close-out costs.⁴

Federal funding for legal aid accounts for \$187 million. Cuts threaten services for hundreds of thousands of Californians.

Access to legal aid dramatically reduces homelessness, even in non-housing cases, proving to be highly cost-effective.

Every \$1 in legal aid has a return of at least \$7 in benefits for families, communities, and the economy.

For California, this would mean losing roughly \$55.7 million annually in LSC funding, which supports 11 legal aid organizations serving approximately **168,000 Californians** each year across nearly all 58 counties. In 2024 alone, these organizations closed more than 71,000 cases, nearly half of which (48 percent) were housing-related, an issue tied closely to family stability and community safety. The impact would be especially devastating in California's attorney deserts, where rural and tribal communities already face severe shortages of legal aid attorneys and challenges accessing services. Federal cuts would widen California's justice gap, leaving more people without help for urgent issues such as avoiding eviction, keeping mixed-status immigrant families together, recovering stolen wages, and protecting elders and children from abuse.

In addition to LSC, other federal agencies, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Department of Health and Human Services, fund legal services. In total, California stands on a federal funding precipice of \$187 million, threatening services that prevent eviction and foreclosure, address domestic violence, secure public benefits, and protect immigrant families and workers.

Civil legal aid isn't just essential, it's a smart investment. **Every \$1 spent yields at least \$7 in economic return**, 6 reducing strain on court and health systems, and strengthening families and communities across California.

I. BACKGROUND





CUTS WOULD LEAVE SENIORS, VETERANS, AND SURVIVORS UNPROTECTED

LSC Funding Non-LSC Funding

"Too many families face eviction, fraud, or violence without a lawyer by their side—not because their problems aren't urgent, but because there are too few attorneys and too little funding to meet the need. Federal cuts would not just reduce services; they would dismantle the only safety net protecting seniors, veterans, survivors of violence, and low-income families in regions already considered legal deserts.

When we lose legal aid funding, we don't just lose cases—we lose homes, stability, and lives. Sustaining and strengthening legal aid funding is the only way to ensure that the promise of justice extends to every rural community and every struggling family in California."

- Pablo Ramirez, Executive Director, Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino County



The 2024 California Justice Gap Study shows that most low-income Californians face serious civil legal problems without help. Federal funding cuts will only deepen this gap, undermining cost-effective programs that prevent homelessness, stabilize immigrant families, safeguard survivors of violence, and ensure access in rural and underserved communities. The result will be deeper inequities and higher system-wide costs across California.

1. Housing Stability

California is home to over six million renters, over half of whom are rent burdened in the face of soaring housing costs. On a given night, **more than 187,000 Californians** experience homelessness. Although just 12 percent of the U.S. population lives in California, the state accounts for **30 percent of the nation's homeless population** and half of its unsheltered population, or those living outdoors and in vehicles not meant for habitation.

Homelessness-related spending in California reached \$6.8 billion in 2022–2023, fueled by a surge in state revenue and flexible federal funds. ¹⁰ However, in 2024, housing programs lost \$1.1 billion in state budget cuts, and the 2025–2026 budget includes no new one-time allocations. ¹¹ With potential federal cuts to vital housing programs looming, sustaining investments that keep Californians housed is more urgent than ever.

Federal housing programs support more than **920,000 Californians** through programs such as HUD's Community Development Block Grant and housing choice vouchers. Legal help is equally essential: a statewide study found that half of people experiencing homelessness had an unaddressed legal issue. In San Francisco, **46 percent of at-risk clients who received legal aid avoided becoming homeless**.

Legal aid is a critical tool in addressing California's affordability crisis and widening income inequality. Housing ranks among the **top three types of civil legal problems** Californians face, yet **84 percent of substantial housing-related problems go unaddressed**. Families burdened by high housing costs are especially vulnerable. Urgent life challenges—such as child custody, visitation, and healthcare access—are often compounded by involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2024, the State Bar surveyed California public defenders to shed light on the intersection of civil legal needs and involvement in the criminal justice system: **71 percent** identified housing as a major civil legal issue affecting their clients. In 2024, the State Bar surveyed California public defenders to shed light on the intersection of civil legal needs and involvement in the criminal justice system: **71 percent** identified housing as a major civil legal issue affecting their clients.

Each episode of homelessness is traumatic for those experiencing it, and costly for communities. On average, homelessness costs \$35,000 per person annually in crisis response services, such as emergency shelter, policing, and health care. By contrast, eviction prevention typically involves just 15 to 25 hours of attorney time for a standard unlawful detainer case, offering a far more humane, cost-effective, and stabilizing intervention.

The State Bar's Homelessness Prevention (HP) grant program has been a cornerstone of California's legal aid response. Between 2019 and 2024, the State Bar distributed **\$161 million in HP grants to fund eviction defense, foreclosure prevention**, and legal services that stabilize housing. With that investment, legal aid organizations:

- Served 191,727 people in households;
- · Addressed at least 86,043 legal problems;
- Prevented over 14,500 evictions, and 14,054 illegal or unfair behaviors;
- Recovered at least \$37 million on behalf of clients; and
- Saved clients at least \$31 million in waived rent, reduced debt, and other cost savings.





LEGAL AID HELPS SECURE 3,000 AFFORDABLE HOMES FOR RESIDENTS

The settlement in *Martinez v. City of Clovis* paves the way for 3,000 new units of affordable housing in California's Central Valley. Lead plaintiff Desiree Martinez stated, "This legal case has transcended beyond my personal circumstances; it now represents the struggle of every individual combatting the high cost of living and striving to survive. Today, this lawsuit symbolizes the fight for a more inclusive community that embraces people from all backgrounds." Martinez was represented by Central California Legal Services and Public Interest Law Project.

HP funding also supported hundreds of legal aid jobs, including **622 attorneys, 286 paralegals, and 215 other staff** statewide. Yet no new HP dollars have been appropriated by the California legislature to sustain this critical housing stability work. While some organizations may continue drawing down remaining funds, those dollars will soon be exhausted.

Without renewed investment, legal aid organizations will be forced to make hard choices about scaling back or discontinuing services. This funding cliff threatens not only vital protections for vulnerable Californians, but also the stability of the legal aid workforce, especially in rural areas where recruitment and retention are already most challenging.

2. Impact on Immigrant Communities

California faces a critical shortage of immigration legal services. Currently, **only 2 percent of the state's attorneys practice immigration law**, leaving the system under immense strain. Demand has surged following stricter federal enforcement and anti-immigrant policies. The shortage disproportionately affects low- and middle-income immigrant communities the hardest, for whom roughly two-thirds of immigration legal issues go unaddressed.¹⁸

IMMIGRATION ATTORNEYS FACE BURNOUT AMID RISING CASELOADS

"The direct services cases, especially in immigration, are getting more complicated and we're getting more of them in different ways, because more people are becoming detained, and the time from detention to deportation is becoming quicker. They're more complex. Our attorneys are working a lot harder. We're concerned about burnout and their well-being. Also, a lot of immigration cases that were closed are being re-calendared, and that's another kind of capacity that we're having to deal with that we hadn't expected. We're getting new cases and reopening old clients' cases. We're having to do a lot more with a smaller staff."

- Belinda Escobosa, Chief Strategy Officer, Asian Law Caucus



Even with recent state investments in immigration legal services, such as the additional \$25 million allocated in the 2025 Budget Act to the State Bar of California, Department of Social Services, and California Access to Justice Commission, resources fall far short of meeting rising need. In a 2025 State Bar survey, **84 percent** of legal aid organizations reported an increase in immigration-related requests.

Between 2020 and 2024, legal aid organizations closed a total of 112,190 immigration cases; held 733 self-help clinics reaching 21,216 people; and conducted 12,424 education workshops and trainings, 4,697 outreach events, and more than 27,000 hotline calls. From 2023 to 2024 alone, immigration services increased by 117 percent, and the number of people served grew by 64 percent (from 16,720 to 27,347 individuals).

Altogether, organizations recovered \$45 million and saved at least \$6.6 million on behalf of clients from 2020 to 2024, and also worked to:

- Prevent deportation (5,693 cases);
- Obtain employment authorization (8,773 cases); and
- Secure legal status (6,559 cases).

Despite this impact, access remains deeply inequitable: 25 California counties have no legal organization participating in the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) Recognition and Accreditation Program, severely limiting equitable access to immigration legal services. ¹⁹ The program expands availability of immigration legal services to low-income people, by authorizing qualified non-attorney employees and volunteers at approved nonprofit organizations to represent clients before the federal government.

FEAR OF RETALIATION MASKS THE TRUE IMPACT OF CUTS

"It's not only the funding landscape that is changing. The overall landscape of people asserting their rights is changing. We've seen a reduction in the number of people that are willing to file wage claims because there's such a fear of even coming to the attention of any authorities. So, some of the impact of the funding losses have been masked a little by the fact that there are fewer people coming forward because there is so much fear."

- Kevin Clune, Vice President of Strategy, Legal Aid at Work

The consequences of federal policy changes are profound. Executive orders and expanded inter-agency data-sharing agreements—including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) access to IRS tax records and HUD housing data—have intensified fear in immigrant communities, despite no changes in public benefit eligibility rules. The provisions in current federal policy are particularly alarming.

These provisions would:

- Quadruple ICE's detention budget, allocating \$45 billion through 2029, including funds for family and indefinite child detention, violating the Flores Settlement Agreement;
- Dramatically increase funding for deportation raids, racial profiling, and expedited removal with minimal oversight;





- Expand the 287(g) program, which authorizes state and local law enforcement to carry out immigration arrests.
- Impose new fees on asylum, work permits, and legal relief, eliminating fee waivers, even for humanitarian cases;
- Strip lawfully present immigrants (including asylees, trafficking survivors, and domestic violence victims) of access to health care, food assistance, and tax benefits like the Child Tax Credit; and
- Authorize extreme vetting and coercive deportation of unaccompanied minors, chilling community trust and deterring families from stepping forward to sponsor children.²⁰



PROTECTING IMMIGRANT WORKERS FROM WAGE THEFT

Bet Tzedek's Employment Rights Project team helped Adam,* a garment worker subjected to unfair working conditions and wage theft. Paid just seven cents per piece to iron and fold clothing, Adam earned far below the minimum wage and was denied legally required breaks. Bet Tzedek's attorneys filed a wage claim with the Labor Commissioner's Office, which awarded Adam more than \$120,000 in back pay and assessed penalties against the garment factory and its owner. Wage theft and worker exploitation are widespread in the garment industry, with immigrant workers often facing the most severe abuses.

(*Name changed to protect privacy.)

Together, these measures signal immigration policy that reaches far into long-established communities. They also shift the burden of fear to families, undermine legal rights, and deter access to health, food, and housing programs, even for U.S. citizen children in mixed-status households who are fully eligible.²¹ National survey data from 2024 shows the material impacts of this fear, including rising food insecurity and family stress due to concerns over deportation and separation.

When immigrant families withdraw from legal and safety-net systems, it not only threatens their well-being, it undermines California's broader goals of economic vitality and community health.

3. Growing Risk of Attorney Deserts

Attorney deserts—areas with few or no attorneys available to serve local residents—are expanding across California. While most common in rural and inland regions, they are also widespread in under-resourced neighborhoods in urban counties. ²² For Californians who are low-income, elderly, or disabled, this often means there is no one nearby to assist with urgent legal needs.

Today, over **35 percent of the state is at risk of becoming an attorney desert**. Impending federal funding cuts threaten to accelerate the growth and severity of these deserts, deepening the already persistent scarcity of legal services across California



Shrinking Legal Workforce

- Over the past decade, 76 percent of California's counties have seen declines in active attorneys. More than half (55 percent) lost attorneys even as their populations grew.²³
- Once evenly split, the legal market has shifted: the portion serving individuals now accounts for just 24.4 percent
 of California's total legal market. A key reason: legal services have become "increasingly unaffordable to ordinary
 people."²⁴
- Legal aid organizations serve individuals from marginalized and low-income communities, but they face chronic recruitment and retention challenges. Turnover is higher than ever before: over 51 percent of legal aid attorneys leave within their first two years, up from 40 percent a decade earlier.²⁵
- Most hiring in legal aid does not expand services. It replaces staff lost to attrition that is driven by large workloads, low salaries, and high cost of living. The result is a constant struggle to maintain baseline capacity for organizations serving Californians with the greatest needs.²⁶

Widening Geographic Disparities

- Just 3 percent of active attorneys live in rural areas, though these areas are home to 12 percent of the state's population.²⁷
- From 2020 to 2024, counties received an average of \$6.26 million each from the State Bar. Yet some of the smallest, most rural counties received dramatically less: Alpine (\$11,980), Sierra (\$23,360), Mono (\$94,540), Modoc (\$105,210), and Inyo (\$130,510). By comparison, the state's largest counties, where need is also high, received the most: Los Angeles (\$105 million), San Diego (\$26 million), and Orange (\$24 million).
- Like disparities in access to health care, attorney deserts reflect profound geographic inequities in access to
 justice. Rural Californians face similar legal needs as urban residents but few new attorneys express interest in
 rural practice.²⁸
- Fresno illustrates this imbalance: While Fresno is the fifth-largest city in California, 98 percent of Fresno County is rural.²⁹ Nearly 37 percent of residents live outside the city, yet only 5 percent of attorneys practice in those areas.³⁰

More Counties at Risk

- As of 2025, 16 of California's 58 counties qualify as attorney deserts. Another 21 more are at risk.³¹
- California averages 4.3 attorneys per 1,000 residents, but this figure conceals deep regional and internal disparities. Counties with the lowest attorney-to-resident ratios tend to be smaller, poorer, and more rural, and their numbers are growing.

This growing imbalance leaves many Californians without meaningful access to legal help, exacerbating geographic disparities and deepening isolation, while placing added strain on already under-resourced communities.







A SAFE HOME IN HIS FINAL DAYS: LEGAL ADVOCACY IN RURAL CALIFORNIA

A staff attorney at California Advocates for Nursing Reform (CANHR) provided advocacy support to an attorney at a legal services program in rural northern California to prevent the eviction of an older adult with terminal cancer. After the death of his mother, the client faced eviction from his stepfather, who had amended a trust to disinherit him, despite the mother's will granting him a life estate. CANHR assisted the legal services program staff with drafting a letter in response to opposing counsel's letter, guiding them through negotiations to maintain the life estate and prevent eviction of their low-income client. As a result, opposing counsel agreed to allowing the client to remain in the home. The legal services attorney later wrote to CANHR's staff to share her appreciation for the support and expertise: "Thank you so much for all your help; it seems likely that the trust representatives have just given up trying to fight this out, and I credit that to the strength of your knowledge that we were able to incorporate into our communications."



4. Survivors of Violence and Crime

Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) federal funding is a critical lifeline for California's **816,000 crime victims**. It supports essential services such as: emergency shelter, trauma counseling, and legal aid for survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, human trafficking, and elder abuse. But these services are now in jeopardy.

Federal cuts threaten to slash California's VOCA funds by **45 percent**. ³² While the state provided a one-time \$103 million backfill in 2024, **no replacement funds are included in the 2025–2026 budget**. As a result, California's VOCA-supported programs face a **67 percent funding drop since 2019**, threatening the continuity of core safety-net services statewide. ³³ Without VOCA, providers will be forced to scale back or eliminate legal services, including life-saving support that helps survivors secure emergency restraining orders, regain custody of their children, and access safe housing.

Legal aid is essential to protecting survivors. Between 2020 and 2024, legal aid organizations closed more than 54,000 domestic violence cases and delivered a broad array of preventive and outreach services, including 7,061 self-help clinics that reached over 101,000 people, 5,522 educational workshops and trainings, 12,681 outreach events, and more than 21,000 hotline calls. Over this period, they also:

- Obtained over 21,300 restraining orders; and
- Secured assistance for 57,606 people in households.

Demand is rising sharply. From 2023 to 2024, the number of people served in domestic violence cases increased by 18 percent. The costs of inaction are staggering. A recent study by University of California, San Diego and Tulane University estimates that domestic violence costs **\$88,019 per survivor annually** in California, including lost wages, emergency medical care, and law enforcement and crisis responses.³⁴ The same study estimates that the total annual cost to the state in 2022 was \$73.7 billion—over **16 percent of the state budget**.



SECURING SAFE PATHWAYS FOR CHILDREN AND SURVIVORS

A woman came to San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program's Domestic Violence Restraining Order Clinic seeking assistance with obtaining a restraining order after enduring years of abuse by her now ex-husband. Although she was divorced from him, she remained involved in his life because of a close relationship with her former stepson. Recently, she became aware that her ex-husband was physically and verbally abusing the child, and she wanted to protect him. With the clinic's guidance, she learned that obtaining guardianship of the child would give her legal standing to include him on the restraining order. She was able to secure guardianship followed by a restraining order. Because of this legal assistance, the child was removed from an abusive environment and now lives in a home where he is safe. With the security provided by his guardianship, he was able to access therapy and start healing.

Legal aid is one of the most cost-effective interventions available. It helps resolve crises before they escalate into costly, community-wide emergencies. When legal aid and support services are cut, these costs shift to local governments and emergency systems, multiplying public expenses while deepening harm to survivors. VOCA-funded services are especially critical in underrepresented and rural communities, where legal help is already scarce. As VOCA funding disappears, those with the fewest resources will face the steepest losses, worsening geographic and racial inequities across California.

III. PROTECT AND SUSTAIN LEGAL AID AMID FEDERAL CUTS



The federal administration has already reduced key funding streams and signaled deeper cuts to programs that low-income Californians rely on. These reductions will have immediate and serious consequences for the state's most vulnerable residents.

To protect access to justice and mitigate the impact of federal disinvestment, the following policy recommendations aim to strengthen and sustain California's legal aid infrastructure.

1. Scale Up State Funding to Legal Aid

Expand investments through EAF and aligned state grant programs to bolster California's legal aid infrastructure amid deep federal cuts. An increase of at least \$50 million in EAF support would help stabilize services and protect Californians from federal disinvestment. At least 75 percent of these additional EAF funds would be distributed as formula grants to Qualified Legal Services Projects (QLSPs) and Support Centers based on the proportion of federal funding each grantee received in 2025. Up to 25 percent of the funds would be awarded as competitive grants to QLSPs and Support Centers that demonstrate need due to federal, state, and local funding cuts or that serve rural communities.

In addition, provide increased, multi-year, and flexible funding that prioritizes support for organizations providing legal services that prevent homelessness, ensure family stability, and protect Californians facing urgent civil issues before they escalate, saving costs for both families and the state.

FUNDING INSTABILITY THREATENS CORE SERVICES

"There's a lot of uncertainty right now. Federal funding is about 30 percent of our entire budget. Trying to serve a population and hire and staff it without knowing where the money is going to come from has been probably the biggest impact of funding cuts. There's also less grant opportunities available. And even then, we're uncertain if the grants we currently have are going to get renewed. This means that we aren't able to plan capacity or service levels more than three or four months out."

- Jimena Vasquez, Director of Legal Services, Survivor Justice Center

2. Restore Flexible Funding to Address Urgent and Emerging Issues

Eliminate current restrictions on EAF grants to align them with the flexibility of IOLTA funding. Under the Budget Act of 2025, providers must divert scarce time and resources to verifying eligibility rather than delivering time-sensitive services.³⁵

IOLTA serves as foundational, core funding for legal aid organizations supporting both operations and services without being tied to narrow activity categories. Making EAF similarly flexible would allow organizations to expand reach, respond quickly to emerging needs, and focus on impact rather than administrative hurdles.

III. PROTECT AND SUSTAIN LEGAL AID AMID FEDERAL CUTS



WITHOUT STABLE FUNDING, LEGAL AID RISKS LOSING TALENT AND SERVICE QUALITY

"Legal aid organizations already can't compete with the private sector and the government sector in terms of salaries. And then, when you add the uncertainty of future employment into that mix, you have the potential to lose some really good people, and you lose institutional knowledge. It affects the quality of services. It's not easy to just get people back when all of a sudden, maybe a year or two later, we have more funding."

- Joanne Franciscus, Chief Executive Officer, Legal Aid Society of San Diego

3. Promote Cross-Sector and State Collaboration

Invest in collaborative models, such as Medical-Legal Partnerships and housing-first legal approaches, that integrate civil legal services into health, housing, and social service systems. These holistic approaches leverage legal aid's cost-effectiveness with its high return on investment, improving outcomes for individuals, families, and communities across California.

At the same time, establish formal partnership frameworks with state agencies. Regular working groups and coordinated sessions between agency staff and legal aid providers can identify emerging legal needs, address barriers, and embed legal insights into program design, ensuring that services and policies respond to evolving challenges facing Californians.

4. Build Public-Private Partnerships

Develop targeted partnerships with philanthropic and private-sector funders to complement state support. Philanthropy can incubate innovative or higher-risk initiatives that government funding may not initially support, with proven models later sustained through IOLTA or other public funds.

Framing legal aid as part of broader strategies to reduce poverty, improve health, and strengthen economic stability will attract new partners and resources, expanding the reach of California's legal aid infrastructure.

5. Strengthen Organizational Resilience and Workforce Capacity

Create a resilience and workforce fund to support legal aid organizations to weather significant funding cuts while protecting the pipeline of future attorneys. Resources should support strategic planning, including mergers, spinoffs, or transitions that preserve services, as well as professional advisors to guide these processes.

Simultaneously, invest in recruitment and retention by expanding paid fellowships, loan repayment assistance, and other incentives that build a skilled, diverse workforce. Without such investment, federal cuts risk deepening workforce shortages and undermining long-term service capacity, particularly in rural and underserved communities where access is already most limited.

6. Build a Immigration Legal Capacity Network

Create a statewide fund to expand immigration representation and community-based defense. Multi-year, flexible grants should support recruitment of attorneys and Accredited Representatives, strengthen rapid-response networks, fund family preparedness services, and expand collaboration between legal and social-service providers to protect immigrant and mixed-status families.



ENDNOTES



¹ Sarah Bohn, et al. *Poverty in California* (Public Policy Institute of California, August 2025) uses the California Poverty Measure (CPM), which accounts for the high cost of living and adjusts for housing costs for each county. In 2023, 34.8 percent of Californians, or 13.2 million people, were poor or near poor under the CPM. "Near poor" is having income up to 1.5 times the CPM, or approximately \$65,985 annually for a family of four. For comparison, Californians qualify for legal aid if they are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$62,400 for a family of four in 2025. Federal pandemic relief support included the expanded Child Tax Credit, the expanded Earned Income Tax Credit for workers without children, and enhanced unemployment benefits, all which ended in 2021. Emergency allotments for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as CalFresh in California) ended in early 2023.

² Alissa Anderson, et al. *California's Poverty Rate Soars to Alarmingly High Levels in 2023* (California Budget & Policy Center, September 2024).

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ Legal Services Corporation, Office of Data Governance and Analysis, "White House Budget Proposes Eliminating LSC, Defunding Civil Legal Aid for Millions of Low-Income Americans," press release, May 30, 2025, https://www.lsc.gov/press-release/white-house-budget-proposes-eliminating-lsc-defunding-civil-legal-aid-millions-low-income-americans.

The details and justification on LSC's elimination can be found in the Office of Management and Budget's *Technical Supplement to the 2026 Budget: Appendix*. "The Budget proposes to eliminate Federal funding for several independent entities, including the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), as part of the Administration's plans to move the Nation towards fiscal responsibility and to redefine the proper role of the Federal Government. The Budget requests \$21 million to conduct an orderly closeout of LSC in 2026" (https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/appendix_fy2026.pdf, at p. 1103).

⁵ State Bar of California: 2024 California Justice Gap Study (June 2025).

⁶ Legal Services Corporation, Office of Data Governance and Analysis: *The Economic Case for Civil Legal Aid: A Systematic Review of Economic Impact Studies* (2025). The report finds that, on average, \$1 invested in civil legal aid yields \$7 in benefits. This is likely a conservative estimate in the California context. For instance, the Legal Aid Association of California reported in 2016 that every \$1 spent on legal aid in the state generated \$6 in returns, based on evaluations conducted nearly a decade earlier.

⁷ According to HUD, families are considered rent burdened if they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing and utilities. In California, renters make up 44 percent of householders—higher than the national average (35 percent) and more than any other state except New York, according to census data. Renters are particularly concentrated in the urban cores of San Francisco and Los Angeles counties. Compared to homeowners, renters tend to be younger and more likely to be Latino (Eric McGhee, et al., "California's Renters," Public Policy Institute of California, February 27, 2024, https://www.ppic.org/blog/californias-renters/).

⁸ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development: *The 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* (December 2024), see Appendix A.

⁹ Margot Kushel, et al., *Toward a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness* (UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, June 2023).

¹⁰ Monica Davalos, *Protecting Progress: State Housing and Homelessness Funding Must Continue* (California Budget & Policy Center, December 2024).

¹¹ California Budget & Policy Center: *The 2024-25 California State Budget Explained* (2024).

ENDNOTES



- ¹² Urban Institute's Housing Funding Tracker: https://www.urban.org/data-tools/federal-housing-funding-tracker which is based on 2023 fiscal data.
- 13 Kushel et al., supra.
- ¹⁴ Christina Jenq, et al., "What Role Does Access to Civil Justice Play in Reducing Homelessness? An Investigation of San Francisco" (2024) http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.476282.
- ¹⁵ 2024 California Justice Gap.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁷ Costs are for a person experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County, cited in California State Auditor: *Homelessness in California: The State Must Do More to Assess the Cost-Effectiveness of Its Homelessness Programs* (April 2024, Report 2023-102.1).
- ¹⁸ 2024 California Justice Gap Study. According to the study, immigration-related problems are the most common type for which Californians seek legal help, yet approximately two-thirds of these issues remain unresolved even when help is sought.
- ¹⁹ For more on unmet immigration legal needs, see the *2024 California Justice Gap Study*.
- ²⁰ National Immigration Law Center: *The Anti-Immigrant Policies in Trump's Final "Big Beautiful Bill," Explained* (2025) https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Anti-Immigrant-Policies-in-Trumps-Final-Big-Beautiful-Bill-Explained-1-1.pdf
- ²¹ Dulce Gonzalez, et al., Shifting Immigration Policies Jeopardize Immigrant Families with Children (Urban Institute, May 2025).
- ²² California Commission on Access to Justice: *California's Attorney Deserts: Access to Justice Implications of the Rural Lawyer Shortage* (July 2019).
- ²³ 2024 California Justice Gap Study.
- ²⁴ William D. Henderson, *Legal Market Landscape Report* (Commissioned by the State Bar of California, October 2024). The total legal market—which includes solo practitioners and multinational firms providing services across a range of practice areas—has seen significant internal shifts. In the market serving individuals, the supply-side issues have grown from the increasing difficulty in "running a successful law practice that serves the legal needs of modest and middle-income individuals" (p. 31). On the demand side, legal services have become less affordable relative to other goods and services, and those most in need often lack the resources to pay. As a result, the business model for solo practitioners and small firms serving these clients has become increasingly untenable, strained by rising costs and declining demand from price-sensitive clients.
- ²⁵ Legal Aid Association of California: *Justice at Risk: More Support Needed for Legal Aid Attorneys in California* (January 2020) updates findings from a 2010 study.
- ²⁶ Justice at Risk and California's Attorney Deserts identify common challenges contributing to attorney shortages in legal aid and rural areas, including high student loan debt, cost of living, and low salaries.
- ²⁷ 2024 Justice Gap Study.

ENDNOTES



- ²⁸ California's Attorney Deserts.
- ²⁹ The rural calculation is based on the California Department of Health Care Access and Information's Medical Service Study Area designations, as cited in *California's Attorney Deserts*. The figure reflects updated 2020 California census tract data (https://data.chhs.ca.gov/dataset/medical-service-study-areas).
- ³⁰ California's Attorney Deserts uses Medical Service Study Areas (MSSAs), the sub-county geographical unit, to analyze attorney distribution. MSSAs classify areas as urban (75,000 to 125,000 residents), rural (50,000 residents or less, and 250 residents per square mile), and frontier (less than 11 residents per square mile), based on the assumption that legal services should be no less accessible than access to medical care
- ³¹ 2024 Justice Gap Study.
- ³² Hannah Orbach-Mandel, *Supporting Survivors: The Need for Stable Funding for Victim Services—How Federal Cuts to the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Threaten Vital Support for Survivors* (California Budget & Policy Center, April 2025). VOCA, enacted in 1984 as a bipartisan effort, established the Crime Victims Fund—financed by criminal fines and penalties from federal convictions—to support services such as legal aid, domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, and child abuse treatment programs.
- 33 Ibid.
- ³⁴ Jeni Klugman, et al., *The Cost of Intimate Partner Violence in California* (Center on Gender and Equity and Health and Newcomb Institute, 2024) p. 9. The study focuses exclusively on women, and calculations are based on California Violence Survey thus representing an undercount of the total number of victims.
- ³⁵ The Budget Act of 2025 prohibits the use of EAF funds "for legal services defending an immigrant against removal from the United States or another immigration remedy based on a documented felony conviction," in https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB101.