

Patrick sends the wrong message with civil legal aid cuts

GIVEN THE current discussion about state budget shortfalls, it's understandable that Governor Deval Patrick would want to shave every penny he can. But the state's civil legal aid program should not be on the chopping block. A recent report from a task force of the Boston Bar Association determined that the program — which provides crucial services to some of the state's neediest citizens — is already woefully underfunded. Patrick's proposal to cut the budget for civil legal aid is misguided, and it sends the wrong message to the incoming administration.

The program applies to people involved in civil suits, not criminal cases. In criminal cases, the US Constitution guarantees legal representation for all defendants. Civil suits, on the other hand, include cases of foreclosure (resulting in homelessness), child custody, and protection against domestic violence. The BBA report found that only one in three people who qualified for help received it, and called for an actual increase in aid by \$30 million over the next three years. Instead, the governor has asked for 1.5 percent in cuts from the aid program's \$15 million budget.

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\$25.5 million in cuts the governor has requested in unrestricted aid to cities and towns — will probably be rejected by the Legislature. (House Speaker Robert DeLeo announced that he will not make any moves with the budget until Governor-elect Charlie Baker is in office.) But in suggesting the cuts to this program for people who are without other recourse, the liberal Democratic governor has sent an implicit message to Baker, an avowed fiscal conservative: "Hey, if I can do this, so can you."

On the face of it, 1.5 percent does not sound like a lot. But the results of the cuts would be devastating. According to the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, which is charged with administering the funds, the cuts would result in laying off full-time attorneys, and affect 1,344 individuals who will not get aid they would have otherwise received. In a state with a roughly \$36 billion budget, the governor should not be nickel-and-diming vital social services with a cut that amounts to \$225,000. It's also worth repeating another one of the task force's findings: every dollar spent on legal aid to keep people in their homes saves the state \$2 in homeless benefits. That's not only equitable social policy, but sound fiscal policy.