

Protect funding at the grass roots

It is infuriating when people running anti-poverty programs undermine them by wasteful extravagance.

When Americans think about the federally funded program to provide legal services to the poor, for instance, they don't want to think about the big bosses in Washington flying first-class to foreign destinations or riding around the District of Columbia in chauffeur-driven cars. But that's what the big bosses of the Legal Services Corporation have apparently done.

The extent of their lavish spending is unclear. Recent news reports from CBS News and the Associated Press are sketchy. But even occasional high living at taxpayer expense is hurtful when it involves programs serving the poor.

There is never enough funding to meet the aims of anti-poverty efforts. A study last year found that lack of resources forced LSC field offices to turn away one person for every client they can help. That makes it particularly galling for administrators in Washington to pamper themselves with lunch at the Four Seasons and dinner catered by the Ritz Carlton. It is wrong. And while much greater waste in, say, the defense budget is easily forgiven in Washington, any instance of profligate spending in a poverty program produces outrage.

The Associated Press reports that Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, is threatening to withhold

funding if the LSC doesn't shape up. We urge him and others angered by the recent news to focus narrowly on the LSC budget for management and administration. Congress makes specific appropriations for that category, and any budgetary retribution should be limited to that category.

The bulk of the LSC budget is, appropriately, for field operations. LSC funds 140 independent local legal aid societies, including Legal Aid of East Tennessee. These organizations are the heart of LSC's mission. It is through them that the actual work of providing legal services to poor people is done.

The House and Senate have both passed bills to increase funding for field operations for the first time in several years. So the criticism of LSC extravagance inside the beltway comes at a crucial time for LSC at the grass roots of America. And figuring prominently in the CBS report is Ken Boehm who, as head of the National Legal and Policy Center, has been trying to kill the entire LSC program for many years. His motives are in question.

Members of the conference committee who will finalize LSC budget should keep the recent bad press in perspective and vote to increase the LSC field operations budget regardless. Proposed increases are quite modest, especially compared to the vast unmet need for legal services for the poor.