



MLSC

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Urgent Appeal to Sustain Legal Aid in Micronesia

Prepared for Government Leaders and Partners in Justice

August 2025

To: MLSC Board, Staff, and our leaders throughout the CNMI, Guam, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands

Re: Planning for cuts in funding from the U.S. Legal Services Corporation starting January 2026

From: MLSC Executive Director Lee Pliscou

Executive Summary

In 2026, the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) faces a significant funding shortfall due to an anticipated **30% reduction** in our U.S. Legal Services Corporation (LSC) grant. This equates to a loss of **\$667,200**. To maintain our critical services and avoid cutting legal aid to those who need it most, we are appealing to our local government partners for increased support.

This request represents an increase of **\$667,200** on top of the **\$702,385** in support generously provided in 2025 by the CNMI, Guam, Palau, the FSM and each of the 4 states, and the RMI.

A total of **\$1,369,585** from local government appropriations is needed to bridge this anticipated gap and prevent a disruption of services that countless individuals and families rely on.

This is not a result of MLSC's performance, financial management, or community demand. The crisis stems from U.S. federal budget proposals.

The Funding Crisis: What's Happening

Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) is facing a potential shortfall of **\$1.2 million** in 2026 due to an anticipated reduction of U.S. federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) funding. This is especially impactful for MLSC, as LSC funding has historically represented two-thirds of our total revenue. This affects us more dramatically than many other sister legal aid

organizations in the U.S., which on average are funded by LSC for only one-third of their budget.

President Trump, as he did in his first administration, has proposed eliminating all funding for LSC. LSC funding is critical for legal aid not only on the mainland <https://www.lsc.gov/about-lsc/communities-risk#pt-23> , it is even more important for Micronesia.

My assessment is that Congress will fund LSC, but that LSC funding will be subject to some level of across the board cuts in U.S. domestic spending. Working with our MLSC Board Finance Committee, I plan to present a FY 2026 budget to our MLSC Board of Directors for its December 2025 meeting anticipating a 30% cut in LSC funds for 2026 beginning Jan 2026.

What's at Risk

A significant reduction in our funding puts our critical services and infrastructure at risk. If our budget is not maintained, we face the following risks:

- **Disruption of Legal Services: 3,888 open cases** as of August 2025 could be disrupted, leaving vulnerable families without legal assistance for critical matters.
- **Limited Access to Justice:** The ability to accept new cases and help more people in need will be severely limited, impacting our services for new clients.
- **Erosion of Trust:** A loss of legal services will diminish community confidence and trust in a longstanding legal institution.
- **Loss of Expertise:** We risk losing trained legal staff and infrastructure that have taken decades to build and may take years to rebuild.

Why It Matters

“The most innovative, ambitious and successful civil legal aid model in the [Pacific] region is provided by the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC). The MLSC, a non-profit corporation, was established in 1970... indicating its long term sustainable track record and accumulated organizational and technical expertise. It is governed by a board of [10] directors and has 55 staff who provide civil legal aid services across [four independent nations, Guam and the CNMI]... The US funds two thirds of its budget, with separate funding streams available for US territories but still also supporting civil legal aid for non-US territories which still have significant historical US links. Remaining funds are made up by contributions from the governments of the 4 countries, [the CNMI, and Guam], as well as support from grants and donations.

“The MLSC works exclusively in providing civil legal aid, including in family protection, family law, land and property law, inheritance, labour law, contractual disputes...MLSC is guided by a single set of priorities and then each of the [regional] offices tailor and adapt these to make their services relevant to local populations within these agreed parameters.

“The MLSC provides ‘back end’ support for small services in the form of a secure and sustainable funding source, administrative and organizational support, technical assistance including template tools and resources that can be adapted...in developing legal practices and legal awareness raising tools and materials... It is committed to expanding the use of technologies to increase access to its services and legal information...

“The MLSC has evolved a structure capable of addressing the needs of the highly mobile populations of the area, who are frequently moving [within the region], or need assistance when they move back and forth between the Pacific and the US under compacts of free association with the US. A single client can be readily internally referred between country offices, providing a holistic integrated service. Having a single entity helps to improve the effectiveness of legal actions and advocacy for nationals of all 4 countries when they are in the US.

“...MLSC offers a relevant and adaptive collaborative model for making civil legal aid in small countries that do not have the benefit of scale, to provide cost effective and efficient services.”

Pacific Judicial Strengthening Initiative, Situation Analysis of Pacific Legal Aid Systems by the New Zealand Government and implemented by the Federal Court of Australia:

<https://www.fedcourt.gov.au/pjsi/reports/technical-reports/PJSI-Situation-Analysis-of-Pacific-Legal-Aid-Systems.docx>

This is not a startup initiative; it is a call to preserve a system that already works.

Every \$1 invested in civil legal aid [returns an average of \\$7 in economic benefits](#) through reduced government spending, lessened costs associated with court and emergency services and improved employment outcomes.

Our Request

We respectfully request that you:

- **Bridge your jurisdiction’s estimated 2026 gap** through appropriation, contract, or grant.
- **Coordinate with courts and justice partners** to prioritize civil legal aid in your budgets
- **Invest in community legal services** that help prevent violence, protect children, promote fairness, strengthen communities, and at the core, help people solve their legal problems.

We are grateful for your decades of critically important, sustaining contributions and are hopeful for your partnership in 2026 to help us continue our mission of providing access to justice for those who need it most.

For more information

Please contact MLSC Executive Director Lee Pliscou for further information about our financials and our programs.

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MLSC is funded in part by the Legal Services Corporation ("LSC"). As a condition of the funding it receives from LSC, it is restricted in certain activities in all of its legal work- including work supported by other funding sources. MLSC may not expend any funds for any activity prohibited by the Legal Services Corporation Act, 42 U.S.C. 2996 et seq. or by Public Law 104-134. Public Law 104-234 §504(d)a requires that notice of these restrictions be given to all funders and contributors to programs funded by the Legal Service Corporation.