

Legal Aid Association of California

c/o Public Interest Clearinghouse, 47 Kearny Street, Suite 705, San Francisco, CA 94108

(415) 834-0100 Fax: (415) 834-0202

Webpage: www.CALegalAdvocates.org/about.cfm

March 7, 2006

Hon. Dave Jones
Chair, Assembly Judiciary Committee
State Capitol
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0001

Sent via fax to (916) 319-2188

RE: AB 1831 - SUPPORT
Infrastructure - Court Facility Improvements

Dear Assembly Member Jones:

Thank you for your outstanding leadership and contributions to the work of both the judicial branch and the legal services community in California. I am writing to express the support of the Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) for AB 1831, which would ask voters to approve bonds for \$1.8 billion for court facility improvements.

The Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) is a statewide non-profit organization founded in 1982. As the membership organization for California's legal services programs, LAAC works to ensure the effective delivery of legal services to low-income people throughout the state. LAAC's current membership consists of 63 legal services nonprofits, as well as individual attorneys working at member organizations. LAAC's member programs provide high-quality legal services to our state's most vulnerable populations. This provision of vital legal services to low-income and other underrepresented individuals forms an essential safety net in California and often ensures that the programs' clients have access to life's basic necessities, such as food, safe and affordable housing, freedom from violence, health care, employment, economic self-sufficiency, and the ability to access the legal system.

Access to the courts is one of the central components of our member programs' work. Low-income Californians visit the courts every day to create child custody plans, obtain vital elder abuse restraining orders, finalize adoptions, serve as witnesses or on juries, and resolve disputes through small claims courts. Over 300,000 children also come to our courts each year.

These court users deserve safe and secure access to our judicial system, and the courts face a myriad of requirements in ensuring access to court facilities, including the

AB 1831 – Support

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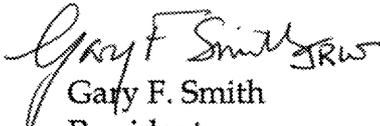
disability access requirements embodied in state and federal law. While these legal obligations exist regardless of available funding, the funds contained in the proposed bonds measures are an important way to address the current problems.

Having access to a legal services attorney, although vital for low-income persons, is not enough when the court facilities themselves serve as barriers to justice. Unsafe security provisions force witnesses to wait in the same public hallway through which criminal defendants are walked to courtrooms for trial. Women in need of domestic violence restraining orders or seniors experiencing elder abuse might not ever go to court if there is no perimeter security at the court location. Court users with disabilities experience routine obstacles that prevent them from utilizing the court system because seventy-five (75%) of California's courthouses are not accessible to persons with disabilities.

Low-income Californians already face a barrage of barriers to accessing the courts. AB 1831 is an important first step in ensuring that the court buildings in California do not constitute a fundamental barrier to access to justice. It is critical that the \$1.8 billion in funding for the courts be made available to allow progress on the most urgently needed projects. Without this funding, these deplorable conditions will only continue to grow, resulting in even more significant barriers to the judicial system.

Therefore, LAAC respectfully urges all members of the Conference Committee on AB 1831 and SB 1163 (Ackerman) to ensure that these bills pass the Legislature in time to be presented to the voters on the June 2006 ballot.

Sincerely,


Gary F. Smith
President

Cc: Conference Committee Members (via fax)
Senator Wes Chesbro
Senator Dennis Hollingsworth
Senator Kevin Murray
Assembly Member Judy Chu
Assembly Member John Laird
Assembly Member Rick Keene

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March 7, 2006

Hon. Dick Ackerman
Vice-Chair, Senate Judiciary Committee
State Capitol
Room 305
Sacramento, CA 95814

Sent via fax to (916) 445-9754

RE: SB 1163 – SUPPORT
Infrastructure – Court Facility Improvements

Dear Senator Ackerman:

Thank you for your outstanding leadership and contributions to the work of both the judicial branch and the legal services community in California. I am writing to express the support of the Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) for SB 1163, which would ask voters to approve bonds for \$1.8 billion for court facility improvements.

The Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) is a statewide non-profit organization founded in 1982. As the membership organization for California's legal services programs, LAAC works to ensure the effective delivery of legal services to low-income people throughout the state. LAAC's current membership consists of 63 legal services nonprofits, as well as individual attorneys working at member organizations. LAAC's member programs provide high-quality legal services to our state's most vulnerable populations. This provision of vital legal services to low-income and other underrepresented individuals forms an essential safety net in California and often ensures that the programs' clients have access to life's basic necessities, such as food, safe and affordable housing, freedom from violence, health care, employment, economic self-sufficiency, and the ability to access the legal system.

Access to the courts is one of the central components of our member programs' work. Low-income Californians visit the courts every day to create child custody plans, obtain vital elder abuse restraining orders, finalize adoptions, serve as witnesses or on juries, and resolve disputes through small claims courts. Over 300,000 children also come to our courts each year.

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SB 1163 – Support

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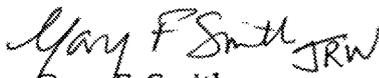
disability access requirements embodied in state and federal law. While these legal obligations exist regardless of available funding, the funds contained in the proposed bonds measures are an important way to address current problems.

Having access to a legal services attorney, although vital for low-income persons, is not enough when the court facilities themselves serve as barriers to justice. Unsafe security provisions force witnesses to wait in the same public hallway through which criminal defendants are walked to courtrooms for trial. Women in need of domestic violence restraining orders or seniors experiencing elder abuse might not ever go to court if there is no perimeter security at the court location. Court users with disabilities experience routine obstacles that prevent them from utilizing the court system because seventy-five (75%) of California's courthouses are not accessible to persons with disabilities.

Low-income Californians already face a barrage of barriers to accessing the courts. SB 1163 is an important first step in ensuring that the court buildings in California do not constitute a fundamental barrier to access to justice. It is critical that the \$1.8 billion in funding for the courts be made available to allow progress on the most urgently needed projects. Without this funding, these deplorable conditions will only continue to grow, resulting in even more significant barriers to the judicial system.

Therefore, LAAC respectfully urges all members of the Conference Committee on AB 1831 and SB 1163 (Ackerman) to ensure that these bills pass the Legislature in time to be presented to the voters on the June 2006 ballot.

Sincerely,


Gary F. Smith
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