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Legal aid group may sue over contract fight

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The group that has provided lawyers for poor children in Wayne County Juvenile Court for 35 years says it's considering a lawsuit because court officials plan to terminate its \$2.4-million contract next Friday.

"We were told to cut our budget by 20% and add three lawyers to the courtrooms," said Deierdre Weir, president and chief executive officer of the Legal Aid and Defender Association of Detroit.

Weir said that when she told court officials she couldn't simultaneously add and cut, court officials told her they wouldn't extend the contract beyond July 10. Instead, she said, the county plans to farm out the association's 4,000 cases -- 40% of the juvenile court's caseload -- to contract lawyers who will lack the legal resources and support staff to adequately represent juveniles in delinquency, abuse and neglect cases.

She said court officials have refused to meet with her to discuss the situation.

Court officials said they had no choice but to order the cuts, given the deepening financial crisis confronting Wayne County and its court system.

"Things are tight, we're looking at every dollar," said Virgil Smith Jr., the chief of Wayne County Circuit Court, who was appointed to combat a \$55-million budget deficit.

He said the presiding judge of the juvenile division, Leslie Kim Smith, has gotten substantial cuts from every group that provides services except the legal aid association, which, he said, asked for an increase.

Weir countered that she proposed a 12 1/2 % cut, but with fewer lawyers to represent juveniles.

"They need to submit a lower amount and begin to have a conversation with the presiding judge," Smith said.

Advocacy groups expressed alarm about the situation.

"We always have to be concerned when the contract for a well-run full service public defender office is terminated," said Laura Sager of the Michigan Campaign for Justice, a nonprofit advocacy group that is pushing for state funding of public defender systems.

She said Michigan has one of the poorest public legal defense systems in the nation, mainly because it's funded by counties.

Cutting costs for legal services for juveniles will prevent children from getting help for their problems, causing them to commit more crimes and drive up future legal costs, she said.

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