

# Blue Ridge Legal Services Fights to Stay Staffed

By KEVIN KILLEN

The Winchester Star

A potential \$54,000 budget shortfall could spell employee cuts for a group designed to help the poor have their day in court.

Cuts in government grants and lack of assistance from localities that keep the organization afloat could have a major impact on the offices of Blue Ridge Legal Services.

The nonprofit law group's officials said less money from state grants and big supporters like the United Way of the Northern Shenandoah Valley will have the most impact.

A Gannett Foundation grant for \$6,000 and a Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro-Community Foundation Grant of \$2,750 also will not be available, according to Blue Ridge Legal Services Executive Director John Whitfield.

The group represents low-income residents in civil matters like domestic problems, custody disputes, debt and bankruptcy, and landlord-tenant disputes.

The organization has offices in Winchester, Harrisonburg, Lexington, and Roanoke.

Whitfield said the fiscal year 2005 budget shows \$1.19 in revenue and \$1.24 million in expenses.

The shortfall is drawing some concerns — and an action



Mary Daniel, a member of the Blue Ridge Legal Services board of directors, listens to Executive Director John Whitfield (right) talk last month about budget cuts the already-lean non-

profit organization operates on.

The group represents low-income residents in civil matters like domestic problems, custody disputes, debt and bankruptcy, and landlord-tenant disputes.

The organization has offices in Winchester, Harrisonburg, Lexington, and Roanoke.

Whitfield said the fiscal year 2005 budget shows \$1.19 in revenue and \$1.24 million in expenses.

The shortfall is drawing some concerns — and an action



Star Photos by Scott Mason

profit organization operates on. The group represents low-income residents in civil matters like domestic problems, custody disputes, debt and bankruptcy, and landlord-tenant disputes.

plan.

To boost its proposed 2006 fiscal year budget, the organization is preparing to ask localities to donate \$1 for every poor person, based on the latest U.S. Census figures.

"That equates to just over \$7,000 in Frederick County, and almost \$3,000 from Winchester," Whitfield said.

Managing attorney Nancy J. Glickman, who has worked in the organization's Winchester office for the past 15 years, said she is concerned about the

budget shortfall.

"We already work on a shoestring budget as it is, but I do fear having to cut employees further," she said.

Glickman, one other attorney, and two staffers man the organization's office at 119 S. Kent St.

Glickman said the group's assistance ranges from simple advice or brief service to ongoing representation, which can include litigation.

The office gets between 30 and 45 requests a week for ser-

vices, and may handle more than 600 cases a year.

All of the work depends on grant money and contributions from supporters and social services agencies. While some localities do provide financial support, others do not.

"I went before the Frederick County Board of Supervisors last year and pleaded my case," Whitfield said. "They listened, but we didn't get any money."

County officials said there was no particular reason that the group did not get any mon-

ey. It was a tight budget year, and many organizations requesting funding were turned down.

But that won't stop the organization from trying again. Between Winchester and Frederick County, Blue Ridge Legal Services plans to ask for about \$10,000 to help close its proposed budget shortfall for the next fiscal year, Whitfield said.

The United Way of the Northern Shenandoah Valley supplied \$24,000 toward the organization's current budget, according to United Way Executive Director Joe Shtulman. That amount included a \$5,000 community impact grant from Winchester, Shtulman said.

Clarke County gave the organization \$1,021 for its current budget, and usually has provided that funding each year for the past 12 years, Whitfield said.

"They've been great," Whitfield said.

Because of restrictions on grant funds, the organization only can serve people meeting federal government poverty guidelines.

"It can get pretty tough because of the workload, but it is very rewarding," Glickman said. "Getting monetary relief for a client who has gone against someone bigger than they are is wonderful."

Glickman also said working

with the elderly can be rewarding. A client recently won his Social Security disability claim after a two-year battle.

"That was a great feeling, because although it took two years, our client got what is owed to him," Glickman said.

Jan Steele, the second lawyer who works out of the Winchester office, said the organization's service is invaluable.

"Helping people who are in most need of our help is what makes this job rewarding," she said. "If it wasn't for Blue Ridge Legal Services, the people who are in real need of our help wouldn't get it."

Local attorney Mary Daniel, who serves on Blue Ridge's Board of Directors, said she is concerned the budget shortfall could spur possible staff cuts.

"We have an excellent group of attorneys and staff. It would be a shame to see anyone go," she said.

Daniel, who has been on the board since 2000, is glad certain localities financially support the organization.

"We need more of that," she said.

Now, with budget season kicking off, it's a waiting game, Whitfield said.

"I just hope that we can get some help so we don't have to cut staff," he said.