

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Legal Services Corp  
The East Room 7/27/99

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

July 27, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AND THE FIRST LADY  
AT RECEPTION IN HONOR OF THE  
25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

The East Room

5:08 P.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Please be seated, and welcome to the White House. It is a great pleasure, and an honor, to welcome all of you here as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of one of the pillars of equal justice in America, the Legal Services Corporation.

There are many, many distinguished guests in this audience today who have come here to help mark this historic milestone, and to remind us of our nation's enduring commitment to protecting the disenfranchised and vulnerable among us: Our Attorney General, Janet Reno, who has devoted her life to enforcing civil rights laws, to ensure equal opportunity for all Americans. We have a number of members of Congress -- Senator Specter was here, Representative Tom Allen, Representative Howard Berman, Representative Ben Cardin, Representative John Conyers and Representative Jim Ramstad.

There are also a number of you who have helped to support those in Congress who have made the Legal Services Corporation a bipartisan cause. It was born as a bipartisan cause in 1974, under President Nixon, and with Republicans and Democrats in both the House and the Senate supporting it, and supporting it strongly. And many of you have, through the years, stood for that bipartisan commitment. Many who have led the corporation and who have led the bar have been the strongest voices on behalf of Legal Services.

I want to thank my friend Doug Eakeley, whose outstanding six-year tenure as Chair of the LSC is a reflection of his life-long commitment to making equal justice not simply an abstract principle, but a reality in people's lives. And I want to thank LSC's President John McKay, a pro bono lawyer himself, who has fought tirelessly against efforts to dismantle LSC and to build broad support for the program.

I welcome as well the current LSC board members, staff, volunteers and clients, including Lucy Johnson, who we will be hearing from later. And I'm thrilled that there are so

many of my dear friends and colleagues from the years when I was privileged to serve on the board and serve as its chair. And I would like to ask to stand all those who served on the LSC board and all who were staff members from its beginning 25 years ago so we can thank you. Please stand. (Applause.)

I also want to thank the members of the bar who are here -- both the ABA, the NBA and state and local bars throughout the country. I know that the President-elect of the ABA, William Paul, is a very strong supporter of the Legal Service Corporation, and the past president, Roberta Cooper Ramo, is here as well.

In addition, there are distinguished judges from around the country, including State Supreme Court judges. And I want to thank all of you who recognize how important it is to make sure that judges are able to see everyone because they are brought into the court by lawyers who are committed to ensuring that all people are given access to the judicial system.

Part of what we celebrate today is the rich diversity of people from all walks of life and from every political persuasion who believe that ensuring equal justice to Americans is everyone's concern and our common responsibility.

Seeing so many of you who have been a part of my and the President's life over the years certainly is a trip down memory lane in many ways. I can think of my own early involvement with the New Haven Legal Services Organization when I was in law school, and then moving to Arkansas, where I took a teaching post at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and when I arrived being told that I was to teach criminal law, run the Legal Aid clinic, run the two prison projects and teach trial advocacy. Now, that took a little sinking in, but it wasn't long before I was invited to the local Bar Association welcoming cocktail party for new members of the law school faculty. And the president of the local Bar introduced me to the dean of the chancery judges in that part of the state, as saying, this is the new lady law professor, she's going to teach criminal law and run the Legal Aid clinic -- where upon the judge looked at me and said, I don't have any use either for lady law professors or Legal Aid clinics. (Laughter.) And I said, well, Judge, it's nice to meet you. (Laughter.)

Unfortunately, we've all encountered people who do not believe in Legal Services for the poor, who don't believe, as we do, that equal justice -- equal access to justice is as inalienable a right for Americans as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- and who don't believe, as we do, that widening the circle of human rights and dignity is fundamental to the promise of democracy. They don't believe, as we do, that every time anyone is denied their basic legal rights, whether because of race, gender, income or circumstance, that our democracy is imperiled.

Well, that is what many of you have understood. And in the audience today, we have Sarge Shriver, who understood it very early on, and helped to fund and support a lot of the early Legal Aid services around the country, including the one that I worked with in New Haven; representatives of the Ford Foundation, who made it a commitment in the 1960s to see whether they, too, could create a system that wasn't just hit-or-miss, but truly was there for people when it was needed; and then, finally, in 1974, when the Legal Services Corporation became the law.

And since then it has been a beacon of hope and the last line of defense for millions and millions of Americans: mothers seeking child support; children without access to health care; families facing homelessness, or living in intolerable housing conditions; welfare recipients seeking training; nursing home residents deprived of basic care and dignity; farmers losing their livelihoods; women seeking protection from abuse.

The people that you have served are as diverse as the problems that you have helped to solve. I think of people like Edith Hernandez of Illinois, the mother of five who had been abused throughout her 12-year marriage. Today, she and her children live without fear. With the help of Legal Services, she was granted an order of protection and obtained a divorce. She now works with victims of domestic and gang-related violence -- and her children, including two in college, are thriving. I'm pleased she's here with us today, and I would like to ask Edith Hernandez to please stand. (Applause.)

I think of people like Dan and Terry Choat, who raise pigs on a farm outside Omaha, Nebraska, and are the parents of six children. Recently, as with many farmers in America today, their expenses exceeded their profits. But with the help of a local legal aid lawyer, they've been able to stay out of bankruptcy and have developed a payment plan to pay off their creditors and save their farm for their children and their grandchildren.

And I think of individuals who have been inspired by others, including many of you in this room, to widen the door of justice for those who have too long been shut out; people like Karen Brown, who's also here with us today, who grew up in public housing in New Jersey and wanted to make a different life for herself and for those around her. She said, I wanted to give people a sense of power so they can do things for themselves. Despite those law school debts and tempting offers from corporate law firms, Karen became a legal aid lawyer, and her first client was the housing project she grew up in. I would like to ask Karen Brown to please stand. (Applause.)

Every one of us could go on and on with the stories that we know of the individuals and the communities that have been lifted up and given hope because of what legal services and thousands of pro bono lawyers and legal aid groups around the country do every day. Yet, if we spent this historic day just celebrating the accomplishments of this remarkable corporation over a quarter century, we would not be worthy of its legacy -- because we all know that as much good work that is done, and as many families that are kept together, and people protected from abuse and given a chance, we still reach only a fraction of those whose services are really ones that LSC and those working with them should be able to provide.

Some things haven't changed since I was the chair in 1980. We still have to fight for every penny we get from Congress. And today, we again face a challenge from those in Congress who are working to slash the budget.

The faces of the clients that the Legal Services Corporation serves, however, have changed. Twenty years ago, the majority of Americans living in poverty were the elderly. Thanks to many federal programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, many of our elderly are

doing much, much better, and are living above that poverty line. Today, of the 40 million Americans living in poverty, almost half are children. Without the Legal Services Corporation, many of those children and their parents would have no place to turn.

So as we come to the end of this century, and approach a new one, we find ourselves at a critical moment in our own history, when the very notion of what we as Americans stand for is being tested. Every day we are reminded of that test when we read the words inscribed over our Supreme Court's entrance: Equal Justice Under the Law.

We know that to keep that promise, we have a lot of work still to do. But like many of you, I believe that this mission is too important to be left to any one group, or even those currently in the Corporation, but instead it has to be the job of all of us. And I believe that if we continue to speak out on the importance of Legal Services for our entire constitutional framework, and make clear that what we are talking about is not for some people, but for all of us, if we are to make good on what we say we believe, then Legal Services will be here long into the next century.

No one has worked harder to make equal justice a reality for all citizens than our nation's top lawyer and legal rights advocate, our Attorney General. I honor her tonight not only for the work she has done on behalf of crime and violence, but what she's done to try to make sure that the American community is all that it should be. And she has been committed to enforcing our civil rights laws, committed for all that she has done to keep America's children out of harm's way, and committed to Legal Services.

So it's my pleasure to introduce a truly dedicated public servant, Attorney General Janet Reno. (Applause.)

\* \* \* \* \*

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Let me say, first of all, I apologize for being late. I've been over meeting with the Russian Prime Minister, and you would have given me a pass, I think. I was doing good work, I hope.

Lucy, thank you for your statement, and on behalf of all of us, for the award. Let me say, I could just sit here and sort of look at all the people that are here. I hesitate to even call people by name, but I want to thank all the members of Congress who are here, including Congressman Berman and Congressman Ramstad. I'd also -- I see Mr. Conyers and Congressman Cardin, Congressman Allen, Congresswoman Waters. former Congressman Cox and Father Drinan, we're glad to see you here, sir. Thank you. Sarge and Eunice Shriver; the ABA presidents, Jerry Shestack, Bill Eid (sp), Roberta Cooper Ramo, William Paul. And I see former Secretary of Commerce and Trade Ambassador Mickey Kantor, who was on the Legal Services board with Hillary.

We all go back a long way, all of us who care about this, it seems like. Doug Eakeley and Tom Allen and I, we went abroad together as young men 30 years ago. We must have gotten infected with a Legal Services virus. (Laughter.) Judge Broderick, it's good to see

you here. And Jim Ramstad said, we were there 36 years ago -- is that how long it was? (Laughter.) They're coming tomorrow, you should come back. Make you feel old, or young, as the case may be.

I want to say that for our family, the Legal Services Corporation has been very important. My wife has done many things I've been proud of, but I have never been more proud of anything than her service on the Legal Services Corporation to which President Carter appointed her, and the work she did as the chair of that Corporation. (Applause.)

You know, here in Washington, everybody's got a lawyer. Whether you need one or not, everybody's got a lawyer, you know? (Laughter.) We forget what it's like to have a lawyer be the difference between homelessness and having a stable home; between unemployment and the security of a job; between the disintegration of a household and holding a family together in difficult times. The Legal Services Corporation has made equal justice not a political cause, but an everyday occurrence. We have tried to advocate that -- I see our former chief advocate, Mr. Dellinger, there -- but this is a person thing for those of us who have experienced it.

Hillary's brother, in the back, was a public defender for many years in Miami. And Janet Reno, as a prosecutor, supported efforts to make sure that everybody had a decent defense -- something that I think is a sterling example.

Everyone of you in this room has that sort of story. But those of us who are old enough to remember when it was different feel it perhaps the more strongly. And I want to thank Howard Berman and Jim Ramstad for giving voice to the struggles we're now engaged in in Congress. Sometimes I think that the Legal Services Corporation, even though it's very young -- 25 years old -- is suffering from the infirmity of its success, and perhaps from the success of our economy at this moment that we have people who may make this decision without the benefit of memory.

So I ask you to remember. It was in 1962, not that long ago, when the Supreme Court had not yet established a constitutional right to counsel in criminal cases. Then the idea of legal assistance in civil cases was a distant dream. Disadvantaged Americans who had a hard enough time just getting through the day found that the legal system was stacked against them, and even if it wasn't they couldn't possibly know it because they couldn't get a lawyer.

Our country's faith in the law was strained in the hearts of many because of injustice and the stain of racism. But the men and women who founded the Legal Services Corporation knew that educating people about the legal rights they did have was critical in the fight for equal rights; that if people did not know about their rights and could not exercise them, the fact that the Supreme Court had enshrined them was of little practical impact.

Today, thanks in large measure to the efforts of the Legal Services Corporation and the countless lawyers you have inspired, it is clear that a lot of progress has been made. Lucy's story really tells the tale. The doors of opportunity are open wider, and we are fortunate now to be living in a period of unique prosperity, with the lowest minority unemployment in our

history and the highest home ownership in our history. We have the lowest crime rates and welfare roles of our generation. But you and I know there are still a lot of poor folks out there. There are still people in places that have been left behind, even by this great recovery.

I traveled across the country a couple of weeks ago, from Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta, to East St. Louis, to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Phoenix and East Los Angeles. And there are still people out there -- most of them, by the way, are working; most of them are working, doing the same thing you and I do every day, for much lesser rewards -- who are having enormous difficulties. So we have this.

It is also true that in spite of the progress that we've made in meeting the promise of equal justice, there are still a lot of people out there who don't trust the legal system, or the law enforcement system. So there is a need -- a crying need for the work of the Legal Services Corporation.

And that's idealistic, hard-working lawyers -- virtually 100 percent of whom could be making a lot more money doing something else -- who believe that the law should be an instrument that benefits us all equally, and that the rights that are enunciated in the law books and in the Supreme Court cases should be real in the lives of all Americans.

President Kennedy did call for equal justice here 36 years ago. Last week in this room, with another glittering array of legal talent, from lawyers to judges to scholars of all races and backgrounds in this country, we renewed our pledge to that ideal.

Today I think we have to say again, equal justice is the birthright of every American. It is the obligation of those of us in public life and politics to try to bring the benefits of this economic recovery into every corner of our country. But the Scripture says that the poor will be with us always. But American law says they will not be disadvantaged under the law. And until we close the gap between our principles and our reality, we will need the Legal Services Corporation.

For years now, some in Congress have tried to dismantle it. They have seen it as a political thing. I do not believe it is political to say a poor person should have the same right as a rich person. I do not believe it is political to say we have to bring the law into the real lives of all Americans.

We have stood firm against the opposition to the Legal Services Corporation. I'm proud that every budget we have submitted has requested more funding for Legal Services. Like Congressman Ramstad and Congressman Berman -- and by their presence here, all the other members who are here -- I was deeply disappointed that last week the Appropriations Subcommittee in the House voted to cut my request in half, leaving hundreds of thousands of American families without the critical legal protections they need.

But need is the wrong word. Under the law, they are entitled to them, as citizens. For 25 years, the Legal Services Corporation has stood above the fray of partisanship, but in the fray of the grimy details of daily life that require legal protection and legal assistance. I ask Congress to put politics aside; to follow on this issue the model of the Legal Services

Corporation, and give the full funding and support the corporation needs. In a very large budget, it is a very small item. But it has an enormous impact.

Think how outraged Americans of both political parties in all political philosophies would have been if this fine woman and all of her fellow tenants had been thrown on the street for failure to pay electric bills that they paid. We could have passed the hat in America and collected the annual budget of the Legal Services Corporation to help them. You know that's true. How then can we walk away from the people who save them, and can save so many like them every day, in every way -- in publicized and quiet ways that we will never know?

Thomas Jefferson once said that equal justice is a bright constellation of our political faith. With conscience and conviction, let us get the support for the Legal Services Corporation it needs. We cannot let the bright constellation dim. Twenty-five is too young, and there are still too many people out there who need you.

Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

END

5:52 P.M. EDT