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FLOOR DEBATE

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Omaha shows that for every dollar spent on legal aid by Nebraskans, nearly four dollars are returned to the state's economy. During 2003, that amounted to \$9,935,436. LB 746 creates the legal...the Civil Legal Service Fund, to be used to provide civil legal services to eligible low-income persons. Low income Nebraskans are identified as earning less than 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. For a single person, this equates to \$11,638 per year or below. For a family of four, \$23,563 per year or below. Under LB 746, the State Court Administrator shall distribute the funds in the form of grants. Any money in the fund at the end of a calendar year shall be distributed in the following calendar year. State Court Administrator shall establish guidelines for submission of grants to provide legal services. LB 746 defines a civil legal service provider and specifies that an independent certified public accountant shall annually audit the accounts of each grant recipient. You will note that as the bill is drafted, where originally we had no dollar amount indicated, I have an amendment that will remedy that, as we left it to the discrimination of the Appropriations Committee, and I say we are dealing with that at this time in an amendment. At one time Legal Aid received most of its funding from the federal government. Now only about a fourth of it comes from National Legal Service Corporation, which is funded by Congress, and that's typical of what's been happening. We're dropping...federal monies are being dropped off of programs that have been used to help people, and we'll deal with that in other facets as we go along through the budget process. Currently, Legal Aid of Nebraska receives funding from law firms, foundations, corporations, and private individuals. Federal funds for legal aid are projected to be 5 percent less for '05-07. Thus, they will begin to serve fewer people unless additional funding can be obtained. I want to assure you that 87 cents of every dollar goes to direct services. Only 13 percent of the budget goes to overhead. On average, each case costs about \$682. The average hourly rate is \$52 an hour. Rural and urban areas are equally served, and services are equitably distributed across the state, based on the poverty population in each county. Nebraska is 1 of 25 states that does not provide state appropriation for legal aid. So in this case, this is something that's necessary, it's something that will aid