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## Budget ax looming over low-income mediation programs

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A Chicago organization is facing budget cuts that would significantly reduce its ability to help develop mediation programs for low-income people.

The Resolution System Institute supports court-related alternative dispute resolution programs in Illinois. The institute's State-wide Mediation Access Project has worked for the past two years to provide free mediation programs for poor and low-income individuals who are not represented by lawyers.

The institute aided in the establishment of mediation programs in the 11th Judicial Circuit in central Illinois and the 1st Judicial Circuit in southern Illinois.

"Those programs will continue to exist, but our effort to continue to build programs will end," Susan M. Yates, the institute's executive director, said Thursday in a telephone interview.

The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) has funded the mediation project since 2008. The foundation's grant for the project is \$70,000, Yates said.

If financial assistance is not forthcoming from other sources, the institute will eliminate a staff position and end the mediation

project at month's end, Yates added.

Leslie Corbett, the foundation's executive director, said in late July that the 50 percent cut in state funding would lead to fewer people receiving legal assistance and a more competitive grant process.

Yates said: "I understand that the state state cut IEJF's funding. So we're really hoping to find someone who will be able to help us preserve this important program."

Corbett said Thursday that no decisions have been made regarding funding for the institute. She said the foundation is amid its grants process.

The foundation provided \$3.5 million to 23 organizations during fiscal 2009. The foundation is set to receive a \$1.75 million state appropriation for fiscal 2010.

"We're crossing our fingers that we get the whole [appropriation] by the end of the year," Corbett said.

The foundation provides funds for two other mediation programs — the Center for Analysis of Alternative Dispute Resolution Systems and the John R. Tate Advocacy Center in Kankakee.

The foundation's board will meet in early December to determine which groups will receive grants and the grant amounts,

Corbett said.

"The decisions that are going to have to be made will be incredibly difficult. They are all good organizations," Corbett said.

The 11th Judicial Circuit's small-claims mediation program was established in the fall of 2008. The program has a success rate of 80 percent to 85 percent in resolving small-claims matters for pro se clients in McLean County, said Deborah Haas, the 11th Circuit's mandatory arbitration administrator.

The foundation trained the program's 17 mediators, Haas said. "I don't know where you can get better training," she said.

The foundation's anticipated funding cuts won't "affect our program as it is," she said. "If we were going to try to get funding for future mediation training it could have an impact."

This year, the foundation started working with the Dispute Resolution Institute, a community mediation center in Carbondale, to create the small-claims mediation program in the 1st Circuit.

"We won't be there to help them expand their programs, train new mediators, and expand into more rural counties to provide mediation services ... throughout the 1st Circuit," Yates said.