



Law offices of

SENIOR LEGAL SERVICES

Protecting Rights and Empowering Lives

CONTACT: Richard Eisendorf
Senior Legal Services
(831) 460-6878
reisendorf@seniorlegal.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Legal Lifeline at Risk: The Fight to Keep Santa Cruz and San Benito Seniors Housed

SANTA CRUZ, CA, May 13, 2026 — Senior Legal Services (SLS) is calling on the California Department of Aging (CDA) to adopt Option A for statewide funding requirements, which mandates a 2% minimum allocation for legal services.

While the state explores three paths to federal compliance, SLS warns that the alternatives—Options B and C—slash legal funding minimums to a mere 1%. This comes as Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties face the fastest-growing senior populations in California, with the 65–84 demographic in Santa Cruz jumping 80.9% since 2010.

The Crisis by the Numbers

Funding Gap: Adjusted for inflation, CDA funding to SLS is just 32 cents for every dollar compared to 40 years ago.

Legal Inequity: Roughly 81% of landlords have attorneys, while only 3% of tenants are represented.

Waitlist Danger: Stagnant funding has contributed to a six-week waitlist for legal aid.

"For a senior with an eviction notice on their door, six weeks is too late," says Rebecca Steckler, SLS Executive Director. "Option A is the only responsible choice. It provides the baseline necessary to keep our most vulnerable neighbors from falling into homelessness."

Main Office

317 Soquel Avenue
Santa Cruz, CA 95062-2305

Watsonville

114 E. Fifth Street
Watsonville, CA 95076

Hollister

440 San Benito Street
Hollister, CA 95023

Telephone: 831.426.8824 | Fax: 831.426.3345 | Email: help@seniorlegal.org | Website: www.seniorlegal.org



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SLS argues that a 1% minimum validates a “crisis-only” model. Only Option A provides the resources needed to move toward a preventative model that secures “soft landings” for seniors living on as little as \$1,400 per month.

About Senior Legal Services

Senior Legal Services provides free legal assistance to elderly residents of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties, focusing on housing security, elder abuse prevention, and access benefits, and planning for the future.

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Subject: Public Hearing Comment: Minimum Proportions
To: The California Department of Aging
From: Rebecca Steckler, Executive Director, Senior Legal Services

On behalf of Senior Legal Services, serving Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties, I am writing to strongly support **Option A** for the Title IIIB Minimum Proportions requirements. This would provide a minimum of 2% of CDA funds for legal programs.

Our Region is the Epicenter of California's Aging Population

Our service area is experiencing the most dramatic demographic shifts in the state.

- **Santa Cruz County:** The population aged 65-84 has grown by **80.9%** since 2010—the fastest growth rate in all of California. (2020 U.S. Census)
- **San Benito County:** Currently holds the **third-highest growth rate** in the state for the same age group. (2020 U.S. Census)
- **Vulnerability:** In San Benito, the over-60 Medi-Cal eligible population has **doubled** in just the last decade; in Santa Cruz that number grew by 70%.

The Cost Gap

Despite this explosion in need, our baseline funding is a ghost of what it once was. Over the past 40 years, inflation has climbed 320%, while core funding for grew only 10%. Essentially, we are operating with just **32 cents on the dollar** compared to 40 years ago. We are being asked to serve the state's fastest-growing senior population with only one-third of the "real" resources we once had.

Legal Services as Homelessness Prevention

In the last year, Senior Legal Services handled 797 cases, **44% of which were specifically related to housing.**

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- **The Inequity:** Roughly 81% of landlords are represented by counsel, while only 3% of tenants have an attorney. Legal aid is the only force that can balance these scales.
- **The Human Cost:** Our average housing client lives on just **\$1,400 per month**. For approximately **\$1,500 per case**, we provide the legal intervention that prevents a crisis eviction and either finds a mutually agreeable solution to avoid eviction or secures a "soft landing" for seniors who otherwise have no family to help them.

The Danger of a 1% Minimum

Adopting a 1% minimum (Options B or C) validates a "crisis-only" model. Due to stagnant funding, we currently have a **six-week waitlist**. For a senior with a 3-day notice to quit, six weeks is too late.

Option A is the only responsible choice. It provides the baseline necessary to hire legal staff, reduce wait times, and move toward a preventative model that keeps seniors in their homes. Anything less ignores the economic reality of the last 40 years and leaves our most vulnerable neighbors without a lifeline.

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