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## Reader's View: Cuts threaten timely justice, public safety

Published: August 30, 2013

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Lawyers who regularly advocate against one another rarely have the opportunity to come together, united in a single cause. This is one of those rare moments where circumstances compel us to do so.

We are civil and criminal defense lawyers who regularly practice in, and work with, the federal justice system throughout Idaho — from the consolidated district and bankruptcy courts and pre-trial and probation services, to the Federal Defender Services and U.S. attorney's office.

Our cause is this: the federal justice system in Idaho is on the brink of failure due to slowed spending and devastating budget cuts caused by sequestration. Idaho's congressional delegation must immediately act to avoid irreparable damage to this system.

We have all heard federal agencies complain about budget cuts suffered in the across-the-board cuts mandated by sequestration. But, you have likely not heard much from the judicial branch of government. That is because federal judges are uniformly reluctant to speak publicly about current political issues.

It should be noteworthy, then, when 87 of the nation's 94 federal chief judges take the remarkable step of joining together in a public letter to warn congressional leaders that the very ability of the federal courts to function is at stake. Those of us in Idaho should be even more concerned when our two top federal judges write our congressional delegation on behalf of all of our federal judges and consolidated court to grimly report that budget cuts threaten their ability "to continue to even function as a court and an independent branch of government."

To put things in perspective, the entire judicial branch receives a mere two-tenths of 1 percent (.002) of the federal budget. The minuscule size of its budget has compounded the impact of sequestration for the federal judiciary, particularly in Idaho.

The District of Idaho, which has long operated on a lean budget and embraced cost containment measures as its caseload steadily increased, was recognized in 2012 as the sixth most productive court nationwide. Even with these efficiencies in place, sequestration has forced drastic cuts. Since fiscal 2012, federal court staffing in Idaho has been cut 30 percent, from 56 to 39 positions. Under sequestration for fiscal year 2014 beginning in October, it gets worse. Mandatory furloughs and reallocation of budgets will

not cover the deficit. Federal courthouses throughout Idaho will be closed every other Friday, beginning in April 2014, and a moratorium on civil trials is possible. In short, our federal court has long accomplished more with less, but it is now at the point of not being able to fulfill its constitutional duties.

Unfortunately, the courts are not the only federal justice system casualties of sequestration in Idaho. Idaho's federal defenders, the U.S. attorney's office, and probation and pretrial services have all experienced significant cuts mandating layoffs of essential personnel and mandatory furloughs for those remaining. They too face the very real possibility of not being able to carry out their core functions — threatening timely justice in criminal cases and public safety.

Idaho's federal justice system is in a financial crisis which is unparalleled in our 150-year history. We are pleased that our congressional delegation has expressed a willingness to meet with our court to address this problem, but urge them to do so immediately. Idaho's delegation must advocate for an increase in funding for the judicial branch regardless of whether Congress agrees on a 2014 budget. Committees in both the House and the Senate have approved an increase in judicial branch funding over fiscal year 2013. Our delegation's earnest support of these efforts is critical to preserving our federal justice system.

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