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The Washington Post

March 11, 1992, Wednesday, Final Edition

SECTION: METRO; PAGE C3

LENGTH: 439 words

HEADLINE: Schaefer Clears Funding for Legal-Aid Group

SERIES: Occasional

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DATELINE: ANNAPOLIS, March 10, 1992

BODY:

Maryland Gov. William Donald Schaefer halted his long-running feud today with a legal-aid group by clearing the way for it to receive \$ 260,000 in federal funds. The state also agreed to pay the group \$ 155,000 in disputed attorneys' fees.

"The crisis is over," said Elizabeth Jones, director of the group, the Maryland Disability Law Center. "I'm very pleased with the way it's been resolved."

The center provides legal representation for mentally or emotionally disabled people, including those in state-run institutions. The center sometimes sues the state on behalf of those clients, as it has in a dispute about the treatment of mentally retarded residents of the Great Oaks Center in Silver Spring.

Schaefer had denounced the group for the Great Oaks suit and other cases in which he felt the law center should have devoted more effort to negotiations. In January, he refused to sign a release form that would allow the federal funds to flow to the group.

After the director of the National Institute of Mental Health told Schaefer he might release the money despite the state's objections, the governor's aides sat down with Jones and her staff to seek a compromise.

In a letter signed today, the Schaefer administration dropped its objections to the federal funding and agreed to pay the attorneys' fees. The law center had sought \$ 600,000 in such fees, stemming from three lawsuits against the state. Jones said her organization has agreed to settle for the \$ 155,000 and to work more closely with state officials to seek out-of-court resolutions to future disagreements.

"I think it's time to forget history and move on to the future, and get on with solving client problems," Jones said.

Daryl Plevy, Schaefer's director of legal issues, said the compromise settles "deep and serious disagreements" between the law center and the administration. "We both feel the settlement was amicable, and both parties have a commitment to making this system work," she said.

State and federal grants pay most of the law center's costs of representing clients. Plevy said the state had resisted the center's request for court-ordered attorneys' fees because there was a sense that "what they're doing is using the fees to get paid twice for the same litigation." Requests for such fees sometimes are used as a bargaining tool in legal negotiations, she said.

The letter, signed by Plevy on Schaefer's behalf, says the two parties agree that "nonjudicial forums should be used whenever possible to resolve difficult legal and policy issues raised by [the law center] on behalf of people needing the state's help."