

# A LEGAL-AID BILL ENCOUNTERS SNAG

## Impeachment Politics May Bar Poverty Program

By **WARREN WEAVER JR.**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 12—Legislation setting up an independent Federal program of free legal services for the poor may become a victim, its supporters fear, of the crippling new Washington disease: impeachment politics.

Backers of the Legal Services bill, now only two short steps from becoming law, believe that pressure is being put on President Nixon to renounce a plan he has consistently supported in the past by threats that his approval could cost him Senate votes in the event of an impeachment trial there.

The counterargument is that most Legal Services opponents are hard-core conservatives virtually committed to support the President in any Senate trial, rather than more moderate Senators Mr. Nixon might need to attract to block a two-thirds majority. Most of these moderates favor the program.

Chief sponsors of the bill have been agonizing for two weeks over whether to press for final approval in the Senate, risking the threatened veto. With President Nixon abroad and lines of communication even more uncertain, prospects for immediate action have become accordingly dim.

Ironically, the President himself proposed the Legal Services bill in 1971, and the version now before the Senate meets his only two objections when he vetoed a 1971 mea-

sure. The pending bill is, in fact, somewhat more restrictive than the bill Mr. Nixon called for just a year ago.

Underlying the controversy is the fact that Legal Services lawyers, within the about-to-vanish Office of Economic Opportunity, occasionally ruffled and even enraged government and business leaders of states and localities by the lawsuits they brought on behalf of the poor.

Legal Services lawyers contend that about two-thirds of their cases involve family law—divorce and child custody—and another fifth, housing disputes, with fewer than 15 per cent in the broader, controversial areas of court protests against the political and economic establishment.

The Legal Services bill passed the House last June with a number of restrictive amendments and the Senate the following January in a more liberal version. A Senate-House conference unanimously adopted a compromise in May that a severe critic said retained 80 or 90 per cent of the House measure.

After a close 190 to 183 vote on recommitting the measure, the House approved the conference report, 227 to 143, on May 16.

The surface issue in the last-ditch effort to sidetrack the Legal Services program is the presence in the conference report of continued authorization for so-called "back-up centers," units usually attached to law schools that provide research and occasionally even courtroom advocates for poor clients.

Backers of the program believe that sending the measure back to conference to eliminate back-up centers is a device to open the entire bill to major changes.