

**Public Hearing on Mayor's FY 2007 Budget Request  
Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee of the Whole  
April 11, 2006**

Good morning, Chairperson Cropp and members of the Council. My name is Patricia Mullahy Fugere. I am a member of the Access to Justice Commission and the director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, which is a proud member of the Fair Budget Coalition and Affordable Housing Alliance. As such, I urge that as you make your final decisions regarding the 2007 budget, you adopt their recommendations to put affordable housing and human needs first!<sup>1</sup> More particularly, though, I am here before you today to address one set of such needs...needs that often are overlooked when thinking about our community's safety net. I am here this morning to share with you some sense of the civil legal needs of your low income constituents, and ask that you fully fund the Access to Justice Commission's recommendation to appropriate \$6.2 million to fund civil legal services.

Giving you a sense of these legal needs is a difficult task, for the needs are so great and our time here so brief. Let me try, though, by inviting you for a few moments to look at the world in which our clients struggle mightily, day in and day out, facing obstacles often well beyond comprehension. Let me take you into the world of elderly Mr. and Mrs. B., who had their life savings -- and life's memories -- invested in a home now subject to foreclosure, because they'd been swindled by a mortgage company while trying to secure funds to pay Mrs. B's medical bills. Let me take you into the world of Ms. W, a hearing impaired mother of a disabled child and caretaker of her recently orphaned nephew, who illegally was denied public assistance and shelter, then

placed in an apartment the rent for which was twice her income, and which lacks heat and hot water. Or the world of the K family, whose disabled children were not linked to appropriate special education supports, because the mother's own impairments hindered her ability to advocate for her children. Or finally, into the world of Mr. A., who after years of waiting, secured a housing choice voucher, but was unable to find a landlord willing to rent to him because he had government assistance.

In the District of Columbia, more than one out of every six of our neighbors lives in poverty. We remain ranked the worst state in the nation with regard to housing affordability. Thousands of families live in gravely substandard conditions, and more than 50,000 households are on waiting lists for subsidized housing, some with no place at all to stay while they wait because the shelter system too is stretched beyond capacity. You know these statistics all too well. Thankfully, the government is beginning to respond to this crisis by working to strengthen tenant protections and preserve and expand the supply of affordable housing.

Yet the strongest statutes and most stringent protections are rendered meaningless when there is no ability to enforce such laws or policies. Daily we see scores of low income tenants who sign away their rights in landlord-tenant court, because not enough lawyers are available to advise and represent them. We see tenants of buildings in gentrifying neighborhoods -- and that touches every ward in this city -- whose landlords bully or bribe them into consenting to third-party sales or condo conversions, because they were not aware that the District's laws protected their tenancies. We see residents of troubled neighborhoods desperate to be meaningfully represented at the planning table, to assure that plans to lift up their communities

embrace their continued presence. Your goals in establishing housing policy and funding affordable housing initiatives will never be fully realized unless members of the community are aware of the law, understand their rights, and have access to counsel in those far too frequent instances when their rights are violated or their interests compromised.

On good days, I come close to believing that ours can be a community of justice...but only if we work collaboratively toward that end. Every day, *pro bono* attorneys give of their time and talent, their creativity and counsel. Every day, we in legal services count on their support. But this is not enough, as the needs are so great, now perhaps greater than we'd ever anticipated, and we remain challenged to respond.

The time is now for the District government to join us in this response, to accept the challenge with us, to make real in the District of Columbia the ideal of "justice for all."

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<sup>1</sup>A robust emergency assistance program and a targeted rent supplement program, for low-income, elderly, and special needs residents are critically needed. While we applaud the Mayor for including these in the proposed budget, they are significantly underfunded. The Mayor's budget includes \$14 million for the DC Housing Authority, Rent Supplement and Emergency Assistance programs. \$10.9 million of that \$14 million is simply to be used to cover the shortfall in federal funding. Thus, approximately \$3 million will be split between rent supplement and emergency assistance programs. This funding level is wholly inadequate. The Comprehensive Housing Strategy Task Force, Fair Budget Coalition, and Affordable Housing Alliance have all endorsed a rent supplement program. The advocacy community, in contrast to the Mayor's allocation, has requested \$19 million to serve 2,650 households. We support raising the deed and recordation tax for commercial business to 1.5%, to bring it in line with residential taxes. In addition, we support exempting lower-income homebuyers from the tax increase. It is critical that the Mayor make the rent supplement proposal a priority – the drastic cuts in federal funding have left homeless and low-income families with few other options.