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CONTACT:

Jess Rosenbaum
D.C. Access to Justice Commission
(202) 344-4441

**Leading Law Firms Join with Access to Justice Commission to
Launch *Raising the Bar in D.C. Campaign***

Campaign is crucial to closing the justice gap for indigent D.C. residents

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Recognizing the vital role the private bar plays in supporting the provision of legal services for indigent District residents, eight leading area law firms are teaming with the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission to launch a new campaign to increase financial support for D.C. legal services organizations. The *Raising the Bar in D.C. Campaign*, which has been endorsed by the D.C. Bar and the D.C. Bar Foundation, urges firms of all sizes to donate a certain percentage of D.C. office revenue annually to local providers. Firms committing .11 percent of revenue will be honored at the Platinum level, and firms committing .09 percent and .075 percent of revenue will be recognized at the Gold and Silver levels, respectively.

“District law firms are the most generous in the nation in terms of providing pro bono and financial support for the poor,” said Andrew Marks, a partner at Crowell & Moring who is a member of the Access to Justice Commission. “However, far too many of the most needy in our community are navigating the justice system alone, even when their most basic human needs are at risk. More support from the private bar is vital to filling what is becoming an appalling justice gap.”

The recession has dramatically increased the need for legal services while drastically shrinking the capacity of the legal services network to meet those needs. In 2009 alone, the local legal services network lost more than 25% of its revenue, causing it to shed 12% of its lawyers and nearly 40% of critical non-attorney staff. This alarming contraction has coincided with a surge both in the demand for services and the urgency of the legal problems faced by poor District residents.

“The recession has taken a terrible toll on communities living in poverty,” said Peter Edelman, Chair of the Access to Justice Commission and a professor at Georgetown University Law Center. “Families that were already struggling have been battered by unemployment and foreclosure levels not seen in several generations. There is more homelessness, more hunger, more family violence and fewer safety nets for those who are in need.”

Legal services organizations provide critical interventions to help families who are in legal crisis. By averting evictions, securing protection orders for domestic violence

victims, ensuring that disabled individuals and children access available benefits programs, and helping low-wage earners to maintain employment, D.C. legal services providers help vulnerable District residents to secure their most basic human needs.

A Leadership Circle of eight leading law firms – Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP; Covington & Burling LLP; Crowell & Moring LLP; DLA Piper LLP; Jenner & Block LLP; Sidley Austin LLP; Steptoe & Johnson LLP; and Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP – has enthusiastically stepped forward to launch the campaign. “This is an important, and long overdue initiative,” said Frank M. Conner III, Managing Partner of DLA Piper LLP’s Washington, D.C. office. “Since 2001, the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Initiative has provided guidance for firms in establishing pro bono hours targets. Until now there has not been any comparable guidance for monetary donations.” “Because the model is based on revenue,” added Timothy C. Hester, Chair of the Management Committee of Covington & Burling LLP, “firms of all sizes can aspire to the Platinum level. We hope this encourages wide participation from a broad spectrum of firms, from the smallest to the largest in D.C.”

Firm leaders recognize that a strong legal services network is pivotal for firms’ pro bono efforts. Roger Warin, Steptoe & Johnson, LLP, explained: “Our pro bono program relies on a vibrant legal services infrastructure to screen and identify meritorious cases, and work in collaboration with our attorneys. If the valuable work of these organizations is eliminated or diminished, the Washington community will lose not only the essential services provided by these organizations themselves but also thousands of donated hours provided by the private Bar.”

Leadership Circle firms have pledged to donate at the Silver level or higher in 2011 and have joined in an open appeal letter to the entire law firm community. “We are confident that many firms will be moved by this Campaign,” said R. Bruce McLean, Chairman of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP. “As lawyers we share a unique obligation to ensure equal access to justice. For most of us, this commitment is more than a matter of ethical obligation – it is a matter of principle.”

For more information, or to join the Campaign, please contact Jess Rosenbaum, Executive Director of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission, at (202) 344-4441, jess.rosenbaum@dcaccesstojustice.org.