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# Proposed Budget Slashes Support for Legal Services in the District

**Mayor’s FY2011 budget provides barely half of the funds sought by the D.C. Access to Justice Commission for civil legal services**

*Washington, DC* – District of Columbia Mayor Adrian Fenty has proposed severe

cuts in support for legal service programs in the District even as the need for legal aid

to the poor has skyrocketed.

The Mayor’s budget slashes the Access to Justice Program, which funds legal services

for indigent residents, the Community Legal Interpreter Bank, and the Loan

Repayment Assistance Program, to $1.8 million. This is on top of a $700,000 cut

already made for the current year.  Together these reductions cut the program to 50%

of its FY 2009 level.  The Commission had requested $3.2 million, the amount

allocated in the earliest years of the program.

Programs supported by Access to Justice funds provide crucial support for District

residents,” said Jonathan Smith, Executive Director of the Legal Aid Society. “The

support brings legal services to neighborhoods of greatest need and has dramatically

improved access east of the river. The funding also ensures that non-English speakers

have access to the justice system by creating an interpreter bank for legal services.

The funds also provide assistance to lawyers who choose to work in legal services to

pay their law school loans. These lawyers work for modest salaries to assist the

District’s most vulnerable residents.”

The proposed cuts come at a time when unemployment and foreclosures in the

District are reaching historic levels and other options for legal services support have

shrunk. One of the primary sources of legal aid funding fell by nearly 60% last year

alone. In 2009 the network lost 12% of its lawyers, along with 37% of its support

staff. Things are already worse this year. The $700,000 cut in funding for the current

year is only taking effect right now.

Legal aid lawyers help District residents who cannot afford an attorney navigate the

legal system. They help people avoid eviction, secure legal protection from family

violence, access medical care, and secure disability and unemployment benefits.

“The loss of these funds is much more than the $1.4 million that was cut from the budget request, although that loss is severe,” explained D.C. Access to Justice Commission Chair Peter Edelman. “Legal service providers are experts at leveraging what funds they do receive. For example, a single pro bono coordinator can train and supervise dozens of volunteer attorneys. Losing this money would also mean losing the opportunity to multiply it to better serve District residents.”

“This is a disaster for the low-income citizens of our city,” Edelman said. “The Commission urges District residents, lawyers, and all those who are concerned about access to justice for indigent residents to contact Council members and ask them to restore the funding. We cannot continue to balance the budget on the backs of those least able to bear the cuts.”

The D.C. Council is now reviewing the proposed budget. A final version will be passed later this spring.