



**To: Chairperson Pinto, Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety**  
**From: Caroline Ackerman, Executive Director**  
**Re: Access to Justice Initiative Funding**  
**Date: April 6, 2023**

As the Executive Director for the Amara Legal Center, I am writing to express our support for the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ) and the advocacy efforts of the DC Access to Justice Commission in securing funding for the program. The ATJ Initiative provides critical legal assistance to low-income District residents, particularly those from vulnerable populations like the majority of Amara's clients, to have access to our trauma-informed legal services.

The ATJ Initiative is one of Amara's largest funding streams. Thanks to this funding, Amara is able to provide free, high-quality, trauma-informed legal services in the DC-metro area to anyone involved in commercial sex - whether that involvement is by choice, fraud, coercion, circumstance or necessity. Our clients are sex trafficking survivors and sex workers who are marginalized in society and face complex legal issues. Since its founding in 2013, Amara has provided free legal services to over 500 clients with over 800 legal matters in the DC-metro area. Our practice areas include civil protection orders, family law, name and gender marker changes, vacatur and sealing of criminal records, and victim-witness advocacy.

Funding for the ATJ Initiative is increasingly important to the work that Amara does, especially knowing that DC is a magnet for sex trafficking because of its unique geographic location on the I-95 corridor and close proximity to a number of casinos and professional sports venues. The FBI identified DC as one of 14 cities in the United States with the highest incidents of commercial sexual exploitation of children. According to the FBI, "Black girls, compared to their racial counterparts, are more likely to be trafficked at a younger age and 57.5% of all juvenile prostitution arrests are Black children."<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Amara's DC clients are Black Americans who were born and raised in the DC-metropolitan area.

In the best of situations, navigating the legal system can be challenging but this is especially true for individuals who have experienced trauma. Without access to the free legal assistance that Amara and other stakeholders provide, our clients would be further marginalized by barriers to employment, housing, education, and the opportunity to reunify their families. The ATJ funding allows us to reach individuals who otherwise would not have access to legal remedies, or would have no choice but to navigate the legal system pro se, which often results in retraumatization and poor case outcomes. With ATJ funding, we have also provided numerous trainings to increase the identification of trafficking survivors and to provide access to free, trauma-informed legal assistance for survivors and sex workers. In 2022, Amara conducted over a dozen trainings, including Know Your Rights events for at-risk youth and Human Trafficking 101 trainings for service providers, medical professionals, lawyers, and other targeted groups.

Amara strongly encourages the Committee to invest in the ATJ Initiative to support legal service providers in meeting the legal needs of low-income DC residents.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf>