



*Transforming Lives.
Strengthening Communities.*

April 6, 2023

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Dear Chairperson Mendelson, Judiciary Committee Chair Pinto, and Members of the D.C. Council:

I am writing on behalf of Ayuda regarding the importance of Access to Justice Initiative support for Ayuda's services. Ayuda's mission is to advocate for low-income immigrants through direct legal, social, and language services; training; and outreach in the Washington DC metropolitan area. We envision a community where all immigrants succeed and thrive in the United States.

Community Legal Interpreter Bank

With funding from the Access to Justice Initiative, Ayuda's Community Legal Interpreter Bank provides free, professional interpretation and document translation services to approximately 40 nonprofits that provide civil legal services to D.C. residents. The language access services provided by this project have proven to be essential for our partnered nonprofit organizations in their serving limited English proficient/non-English proficient (LEP) and Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (Deaf) individuals.

Our project helps ensure that DC residents are not deprived of vital services because of the languages that they use to communicate. Since the founding of the Access to Justice Initiative, our city has made great improvements in meeting the legal needs of low-income residents; more and more people are being helped. The only way to ensure that the expansion of services is equitable is to grow the Community Legal Interpreter Bank proportionately, so that LEP and Deaf clients are not left out.

In recent years, increased funding from the Access to Justice Initiative has been essential in allowing our program to try to keep pace with demands, even as new legal services hotlines have become available, new attorneys have been hired, new pro bono partnerships with law firms have been forged, and new organizations have emerged. Increased funding has also allowed us to offer interpreter trainings, increasing the pool of trained professionals who can work with lawyers and their clients in an out-of-court setting. However, even with increased funding, our project is underfunded. Often, we must decline to fill requests for assistance because of a lack of funding.

The DC Code establishes that one of the purposes of the Access to Justice Initiative is to provide a shared legal interpreter bank, an innovative and essential project. As a result of the project, legal service providers can turn to a shared resource to meet all of their language access needs. They should be able to rely on that service. When the Bank is underfunded, requests go unfilled and legal services clients suffer. Legal services nonprofits are faced with untenable options, such as using a client's family member as an interpreter (in violation of ethical and professional standards) or using a volunteer interpreter (who may be untrained and do damage to the client's case). The Access to Justice Initiative has been imperative for our program as we work in service of the city's



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pursuit of language justice, and any decrease in the budget would do great harm to D.C. legal service providers and their LEP and Deaf clients.

Project END: Protecting Immigrants from Consumer Fraud

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Project END combats and addresses fraud uniquely harmful to low-income immigrants, such as immigration legal services scam and bail bond schemes. We combat fraud by providing consumer education and KYRs, and we address it through civil and criminal restitution efforts and rehabilitative immigration work.

Project END seeks to prevent and address consumer fraud affecting immigrants through four methods: 1) Direct representation of victims: To address consumer fraud in the District, staff represent and advocate for clients by liaising with law enforcement; assisting with filing complaints; and applying for forms of immigration relief. 2)

Community education and technical trainings: Project END distributes videos and memes via social media and to a list of area partners, as well as provides Know Your Rights presentations and trainings. In 2022, Project END collaborated with several DC-area non-profits to provide virtual KYRs. 3) Pro bono screenings: To address the confusion around changes in immigration law and the high need for consults, pro bono attorneys provide individual immigration consultations under Ayuda's mentorship. Pro Bono attorneys screen for immigration legal services fraud and Project END follows up with potential clients for in-house legal representation. 4) Client-centered advocacy: Project END liaises with DC and Federal agencies to advocate for policies that assist victims.

In 2015, Project END began representing Martin,¹ a long-time Ward 1 resident and non-citizen. He had traveled to his home county but accidentally overstayed his travel authorization period and was unable to return to the U.S. His daughter found a non-attorney, or notario, operating in the District, who held himself out as qualified to provide immigration legal services. This notario submitted an application to immigration, ostensibly to help Martin return to the US. However, this application submitted was an inappropriate application for Martin. Unknowing, Martin waited anxiously for this application to be approved, only to discover after months that they'd been misled by the notario. This prolonged Martin's separation from his family and caused him significant lost wages. He was able to return with the help of a qualified attorney, and Ayuda helped him submit a complaint with the DC Office of the Attorney General against the notario, resulting in consumer protection action and settlement. Under the settlement, the notario agreed to stop providing immigration services, preventing future victimization. Further, Martin recently received a large restitution payment, representing his months of lost wages. This work was only possible due to the support of the DC Bar Foundation's Access to Justice funding, a primary source of funding for Project END. While Martin was unavailable to provide testimony personally, he is very grateful for Ayuda and states its services are critical to the immigrant

¹ Name changed to protect client's privacy



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community in DC. He would not have been able to file the complaint without Project END's advocacy.

In 2023, we anticipate continued confusion over changes in immigration law and policy, likely resulting in increased consumer fraud by unscrupulous non attorneys, government imposters, as well as fraud against immigrants seeking a driver's license, immigration bail bonds, English language courses, or other related services. Project END is particularly concerned about the recently-arrived migrants to the District, who are uniquely vulnerable to fraud. Project END has begun providing legal orientations to recently-arrived migrants, but needs ongoing support in order to reach this population through 2023 and beyond.

Recently Arrived Immigrants Program

The Access to Justice Initiative also funds our Recently Arrived Immigrants Program, which provides comprehensive legal services, including consultations, brief services, and extended representation to recently arrived immigrants, as well as legal education events and training to local service providers. Ayuda anticipates that the number of newly arriving immigrants will continue growing as the U.S. ends of the use of Title 42 at the border and as the busing programs implemented by border states persist. Newly arrived immigrants face challenges accessing work permits because of their immigration status and lack the established community networks of other immigrants with more time living in the area. As such, many are living in economically precarious conditions, which leaves them vulnerable to food instability, homelessness, and crime victimization. The need for expert legal counsel for newly arriving migrants continues to increase, outpacing our capacity. Ayuda remains committed to helping to meet increased demand; we urge the Council to support this essential work by increasing funding for the Access to Justice Initiative.

If we can provide additional information about the importance of Access to Justice Initiative support for Ayuda's services for DC residents, please don't hesitate to contact me at Paula.Fitzgerald@ayuda.com or 202-243-7318.

Sincerely,

Paula Fitzgerald
Executive Director