

Access to Justice Initiative Stabilizes Families and Preserves Affordable Housing **Kelli Neptune, Executive Director**

The D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center is the District's largest provider of pro bono legal services. For more than 45 years, the Pro Bono Center has assisted District residents who are least able to afford legal help to preserve their homes, stabilize their families, and access disability benefits to meet their most basic needs.

Over the past two years, Access to Justice Initiative funding has been critical to the Pro Bono Center's ability to serve low-income D.C. residents in family and housing matters, including:

Legal Information, Counseling, and Representation for Families

- Legal information, counseling, and limited scope representation for 695 individuals in divorce, child custody, child support and parentage cases. Most individuals are parents or caregivers of minor children and more than half are residents of Wards 7 and 8 with an average annual income below \$20,000. A central intake phone line and court-based office connects litigants to one of three providers in the Family Law Assistance Network, which has served more than 2,200 families since 2020.
- Pro bono representation for 38 family law cases, primarily in contested child custody matters.
- Pro bono resources and training materials to guide pro se parties and family law volunteer attorneys.

When people are driven to the court system to resolve family issues, they face a complex, unknown system that can make binding, often detrimental decisions. Lawyers help people navigate the legal system, alleviate barriers, and prevent negative outcomes.

Access to Justice Initiative funding for legal services can prevent government spending on child and family services, domestic violence services, enforcement measures, foster care, incarceration, medical and mental health care, police, substance abuse treatment, and public benefits.

Affordable Housing Preservation, Eviction Defense, Eviction Diversion, and Housing Conditions

- Legal information, advice, and/or representation for 2,425 tenants and small landlords through a central intake phone line that connects callers with one of five providers in the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network. The network has assisted more than 8,000 residents since 2020.
- Pro bono representation for tenants in 300 housing cases. Lawyers help residents avoid eviction; access safe, affordable housing; and seal prior records that prevented them from securing housing and limited their job opportunities.
- Development and implementation of software that allows six nonprofit partners to conduct intake, place and manage cases, email documents to clients, and refer clients to pro bono lawyers. The system also enables community-based organizations to submit intakes on a resident's behalf from a smart phone.
- Holistic, non-legal services that divert tenants from court before an eviction case is filed. We help tenants search for housing, complete rental assistance applications, recertify their housing subsidies, and connect with social services.

With increased funding, the Pro Bono Center provides services faster, more efficiently, and through one entry point. This program saves time, resources, and reduces the likelihood that our community members will spiral deeper into poverty.

Maintaining funding will advance racial justice. Access to lawyers enables people historically left out by structural and systemic racism to assert their rights and seek legal protections they are entitled to by law. Through the Council's visionary creation of the Access to Justice Initiative, the District has led the nation in reducing barriers to justice for those most in need.

Proposed cuts in Access to Justice Initiative funding would severely jeopardize critical services, stop significant recent gains, and threaten new projects that leverage volunteer resources and technology. Let us not regress at this critical juncture when thousands of our neighbors are still struggling to recover from the devastating impacts of the pandemic.