



COMMITTED TO ACCESSIBLE CIVIL JUSTICE

April 4, 2023

Dear Chairwoman Pinto and Distinguished Councilmembers,

I serve as Executive Director of DC Affordable Law Firm (“DCALF”), and offer this submission to highlight the astronomical level of community need for accessible legal services – services that hinge on the Council’s appropriation of a fully funded Access to Justice Grants Program.

At DC Affordable Law Firm, we have borne witness to the direct correlation between Access to Justice funding and organizations’ abilities to meet community demand for critical legal services that affect the safety, welfare, economic security, and stability of DC families. DCALF plays a unique role in our city’s legal services ecosystem – we deliver accessible justice to modest-income DC residents who do not qualify for traditional sources of civil legal services and cannot afford standard representation, and offer innovative programming to expand access to justice and empower community members with unmet legal needs.

Access to Justice funding is the singular reason that the Family Law Assistance Network (“FLAN”) exists today. FLAN is a single-stream point of entry for unrepresented, low-income DC residents to receive rapid-response family law assistance in life-altering child custody, visitation, divorce, and child support matters from attorneys employed by DC Affordable Law Firm, the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, and Legal Aid of DC. Since FLAN’s launch in March 2020, two weeks into the start of the pandemic, FLAN has been a lifeline to more than 2,200 low-income DC residents who have turned to FLAN for the rapid-response assistance we are uniquely situated to deliver. FLAN attorneys have been able to wholly change the trajectory of cases for residents who had lost hope in our legal system – they have secured the safe return of kidnapped children to their legal custodian in the District, made it possible for a disabled Veteran to achieve a legal win at trial with his attorney at his hospital bedside, and helped non-English speaking immigrants understand and affirm their legal authority to visit with children that ex-spouses prevented them from seeing for years prior. FLAN has been an indispensable resource for the overwhelmingly Black and brown families living in poverty within the District of Columbia, and the linchpin for unrepresented individuals confronting a system and legal issues too complex to navigate without a lawyer.

Three years into its operation, FLAN is now an institutionalized entity and – for many – a household name within the District of Columbia. Staff from DC Government Agencies, Judges from D.C. Superior Court of the District of Columbia, and employees of community-based organizations routinely send individuals to FLAN as the reliable source of support for their most pressing family law needs. FLAN now averages 40-50 callers per week, numbers that are *double* that which we encountered during the height of pandemic closures when the demand for assistance was at an all-time-high.

Without Access to Justice Funding, FLAN would cease to operate as it has so successfully done for the past three years. FLAN is a true three-way partnership, which each organization playing crucial roles to sustain FLAN’s existence and operation – if one entity in this the tripod were no longer a part of the network, FLAN would collapse. DCALF’s involvement in FLAN is 100% funded through the Access to Justice Grants Program, and our sister FLAN organizations each receive Access to Justice Funding to sustain their involvement in FLAN. To point a finer point on the matter – FLAN is the trusted entity through which hundreds of families receive legal support each year, and it remains a question where they would turn if FLAN and our broader legal services community were unable to function as it does today.

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Access to Justice Funding has also been the central reason that DCALF – an organization that previously only offered “low bono” representation – is now able to serve DC’s low-wage earning residents with *free* family law, probate, estate planning, and immigration legal services. The clients we serve are navigating defining legal issues, such as their ability to work in the District of Columbia and gain legal status for themselves and their children, or their ability to gain legal title to an intergenerational, family home following a loved one’s death. For clients who live on very fixed incomes averaging \$56,000/year, bear the costs of living in an expensive jurisdiction, and are navigating acute legal issues, the ability to receive free legal assistance and achieve positive legal outcomes because of Access to Justice funding is transformative – not just for themselves, but for their entire households and their descendants. Access to Justice funding has enabled these hardworking Black and brown residents to tackle their legal issues with a lawyer by their side without also jeopardizing their family’s precarious financial stability.

In her testimony regarding the FY2024 Fair Shot Budget, Mayor Muriel Bowser stated that a focus of her proposed budget was to “put more dollars and keep more dollars in the pockets of DC residents.” Access to Justice is an essential program with a proven record of accomplishment. Access to Justice funding keeps dollars in the pockets of DC residents, helps to cure critical legal issues and prevent exacerbation of others, strengthens our social safety net and families’ economic security, and makes accessible justice a reality for the 42.5% of our city’s residents living in households below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level.

On behalf of my colleagues and the nearly 400 clients we are privileged to serve at DC Affordable Law Firm each year, I implore the Council to restore Access to Justice funding to the \$31.689M, FY2023 level our city’s residents deserve. Thank you for your partnership in enhancing equity within our city.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Majewski', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gabrielle Mulnick Majewski
Executive Director and Ward 5 Resident

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