

District Law Firms Urge Consistent Funding for Civil Legal Services

April 19, 2023

The Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

RE: FY24 Access to Justice Initiative Funding

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

We are writing as leaders of some of the District's largest law firms to express our support for the Access to Justice Initiative. We recognize that the D.C. Council is a model for the nation in its creation and robust support of the Initiative, which provides critical legal assistance to low-income District residents. We are grateful for this support.

That is why we were alarmed to learn that the Mayor's proposed fiscal year 2024 budget reduces 60% of the \$31.689 million allocated for the Initiative in fiscal year 2023, leaving \$13.018 million. Chairman Mendelson rightly sounded the alarm about this drastic decrease in his budget-day press release. This will have devastating consequences for District residents. **With the budget now in the hands of the full D.C. Council, we urge the Council to prioritize the restoration of this funding to the fiscal year 2023 level.**

By eliminating access to critically needed legal services, this cut will put the safety, health, housing, and economic stability of some of the District's most vulnerable populations at risk. Eliminating historic investments made in the program in fiscal years 2022 and 2023 is especially damaging when community need is not waning and, in many cases, is increasing. The pandemic demonstrated like never before that civil legal services are a vital part of our safety net and are a critical ingredient for successful outcomes. The Initiative serves as the foundation of this important work. Drastic cuts will jeopardize our community.

Initiative funding is further leveraged by its grantees when they recruit pro bono volunteers at our firms to represent clients they lack the capacity to help. Though some of our firms have a larger national and even international presence, we recognize our responsibility to our local community in the District and are committed to meeting our professional responsibilities towards those unable to afford legal services. But the fact that our attorneys contribute thousands of hours of pro bono services annually to District residents is entirely

dependent on the relationships we share with local legal services providers. Our attorneys rely on the work these providers do in building trusting relationships with communities, screening cases, providing training, and offering mentoring. Any cuts to the Initiative's legal services grantees put at risk the multiplier effect when legal services providers have the capacity to support pro bono volunteers. The District's leadership in increasing public funding for the Initiative also serves as a powerful reminder to us of the critical need for our institutions to provide financial support to organizations that offer these services. Your leadership and example incentivize us to do more. Both these examples demonstrate a strong, public-private partnership facilitated by Initiative funding.

Again, we thank the District government for its recognition of the importance of providing access to justice for the residents of the District of Columbia. We thank you for your consideration of this letter and our request that the Council again demonstrate leadership in this area by restoring funding for the Initiative to FY23 levels.

Sincerely,

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