



April 6, 2023

Chairman Mendelson and D.C. Councilmembers
City Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Chairman Mendelson and Members of the D.C. Council:

I am writing on behalf of Neighborhood Legal Services Program to communicate stress the importance of Access to Justice Initiatives funding on the provision of legal services for DC families and those residents most in need.

Since 1964, Neighborhood Legal Services Program of the District of Columbia (NLSP) has served the legal needs of at-risk residents of the District in their neighborhoods. NLSP is the only legal service provider in the District of Columbia that has community law offices strategically located in the most underserved areas of the District, including two east of the Anacostia River.

The Access to Justice Initiative funds are instrumental in providing NLSP with resources to respond to the continuing and emerging needs of low-income residents in the District. During the eviction and small claims moratoriums, NLSP averaged 86 cases opened per month. Since the beginning of lifting of moratoriums, we have averaged 118 cases opened per month. With an increase of 137% in cases, the need in our community is as strong as ever. While the pandemic wanes, low-income residents still face economic and housing insecurity, unemployment, familial abuse, and stress at an increasing rate.

NLSP embeds attorneys in the neighborhoods where the need is greatest. With offices east of the Anacostia, our services are accessible to the District's most vulnerable people.

Initial contact with NLSP is made with our Brief Services Unit, where our attorneys provide advice and brief services. The BSU is analogous to an emergency room in a hospital -- both are designed to address a client's most pressing need as quickly as possible. If a client has legal needs that require longer term representation, the BSU attorney is able to assess whether the case is suitable for a NLSP attorney to continue service or whether another legal service organization is more appropriate.

One of the greatest needs in the District of Columbia is stabilizing and retaining safe, affordable housing for low-income residents. Since the eviction moratorium was lifted, more than half of NLSP's cases have been housing related. Through our prevention, diversion, and stabilization efforts, NLSP is able to prevent eviction and ameliorate poor housing conditions before a crisis point is reached. NLSP's community outreach touches District tenants who are victims of discrimination, disabled tenants in need of a reasonable accommodation, or a tenant association looking to exercise its rights under the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act as leverage to keep the building affordable.

NLSP and its sister organizations used Access to Justice funding to create a Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network (LTLAN) – a hotline that connects unrepresented tenants and small landlords with sorely needed legal assistance. This important initiative keeps families in homes.

Through our Family Law Practice, NLSP has played a vital role in providing more direct representation for clients involved in child custody, support, divorce, and civil protection matters. NLSP attorneys conduct thorough investigations and analyze cases to ensure that the highest quality of service is provided to clients to help achieve their goals. For cases that require in court representation, attorneys delivers high-quality litigation experience to clients and provide much need resources to families to ensure stability and safety.

Economic Security Unit attorneys help protect income, assets, and public benefits for our clients. ESU assists people with criminal records, eviction records, and bad or no credit, to enforce their rights to participate in society and obtain safe and stable housing, employment, professional licenses so they can build better futures for their families. The unit's Barriers to Employment Project helps people seal their criminal records, gets unpaid wages for clients, and helps people who are wrongly put on the child protection register clear their names. We advocate for clients who have been denied jobs in violation of D.C.'s Ban the Box law. In our public benefits practice we appeal denials of SSI and SSDI, and unemployment benefits. We help clients whose other public benefits like SNAP or TANF have been wrongly terminated. Our consumer practice protects clients against predatory and deceptive debt collection and helps them repair their credit. We bring suits against landlords who illegally refuse to return security deposits. We help disabled and underemployed clients get students loans discharged and negotiate affordable payments.

With the drastic increase in residents seeking legal services, increases in funding since 2020 have allowed us to meet the needs of low-income families across the District. We expect the increase in cases since the lifting of the moratoriums to continue into Fiscal Year 2024. A decrease in funding would mean less staffing for LTLAN hotline coverage, attorneys stretched further to meet the increased need, and in turn, less District residents receiving vital legal services.

Thank you for your continued commitment and investment in the Access to Justice Initiatives. We are immensely grateful for the support. We ask the Council to provide sustained funding at current levels to ensure we are equipped to meet the continued needs of low-income D.C. families in the future.

Sincerely,



Karen A. Newton Cole
Executive Director