

Submission by Grace M. Lopes, on Behalf of Rising for Justice, to the Council of the District of Columbia Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, April 6, 2023

I am the Executive Director of Rising for Justice, formerly D.C. Law Students in Court, and write in support of continued funding at FY 23 levels for the Access to Justice Initiative. This funding is vital to our organization's ability to prevent the unlawful displacement of low-income D.C. residents; maintain families in homes that are free of dangerous and unhealthy conditions; promote sustainable solutions to housing instability; remove the barriers to economic mobility experienced by our clients with criminal records; and ensure that the administration of justice in Civil Protection Order (CPO) and Anti-Stalking Order (ASO) cases is equitable.

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Rising for Justice has served low-income D.C. residents in need of legal representation for over five decades. During FY 22 and FY 23, Access to Justice funding has allowed us to strengthen the quality and expand the scope of our legal services, social work, and clinical teaching programs, through:

- Initiating an intensive outreach campaign in partnership with other legal services and community organizations to identify tenants at risk of eviction so that we could offer legal and social work supports and services before eviction proceedings are filed, helping clients avoid eviction and secure a path to more durable solutions to their housing challenges.
- Introducing an impact litigation project designed to prevent displacement of low-income D.C. tenants on a high-impact basis by challenging patterns and practices likely to result in multiple evictions, self-evictions and displacement.
- Implementing, as part of our clinical teaching program, a summer legal internship program for law students from local HBCUs to promote a pipeline to public interest careers focused on enforcing the rights of low-income D.C. tenants.
- Bolstering social work staffing levels and in turn increasing the field placements available for our MSW students so that our social work team can collaborate to greater effect with our legal team to address the circumstances that may have contributed to our clients' legal problems, ultimately advancing more sustainable positive outcomes for our clients.

During 2022, thanks in large part to Access to Justice funding, we were able to provide legal and/or social work services, supports, and community training to a combined total of 4,289 of the District's most vulnerable residents. In terms of legal services alone, this represented a 40 percent increase above 2021 levels. We were able to accomplish this by leveraging the contributions of the 65 law students and six social work students who participated in our clinical teaching program last year and by training 162 pro bono attorneys.

The pandemic has had a disproportionate and devastating impact on our client community. Access to Justice funding is necessary now more than ever. Indeed, Rising for Justice will certainly need it to maintain the viability of each of the new and critically-important initiatives we launched in FY 22 and FY 23.