

OUR IMPACT



Access to Justice Foundation

The DC Access to Justice Foundation ensures that the DC Access to Justice Commission has sufficient resources to advance its important work addressing civil justice barriers experienced by District residents.

Our impact...

- The Commission's role in the District's legal community is **unique** and **essential**. We are a **problem solver** and **bridge builder**. Every day, our local courts, government institutions, law firms, and non-profit organizations **lean on the Commission** to bring the community together to advance important access to justice priorities.

By the numbers...

- **890%** - increase in District government support to civil legal aid organizations due to the Commission's annual efforts to secure these funds since 2007
- **\$180** - what every dollar invested in Commission staff capacity translates to in District government support to other civil legal aid organizations
- **\$64M** - the financial support the Commission's Raising the Bar in DC law firms have provided to local legal aid organizations since the campaign began in 2010
- **1,000+** - the number of legal information materials the Commission is reviewing for best practices in quality, accuracy, and accessibility
- **8** - the number of work groups the Commission operates in issues ranging from self-help and legal information, community integration, navigation, coordinated intake & referral, policy advocacy, public funding, courts & tribunals, pro bono, and more...
- **Limitless!** - there is no limit to the number of issues the Commission has engaged on this year... eviction diversion planning, promoting the Housing Right to Counsel project, reforming the District's estate administration process, expanding access to fee waivers in DC courts, championing pro bono and philanthropy... **and so much more**

Support Us...

Our staff capacity of two staff members must grow in order for us to develop and advance solutions that will address the civil justice crisis in our community. **Help us meet our goal to increase our annual support of only \$180,000 by \$100,000. Increase your gift or become a new supporter.**

www.dcccesstojustice.org
c/o Sidley Austin LLP,
1501 K Street NW, Room 4.102
Washington, DC 20005
Contact Nancy Drane, Executive Director,
nancy.drane@dcccesstojustice.org or 202-736-8334



**Access to Justice
Foundation**

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OUR MISSION



Access to Justice Commission

The Commission was created by the D.C. Court of Appeals in 2005. Its 25 members include distinguished leaders from the courts, legal services, academia, the private bar, business, and the community. Commissioners are appointed by the court for three-year terms.

Our Goals...

The Commission seeks to increase significantly the resources for civil legal services, reduce barriers that prevent equal access to justice by low- and moderate-income District residents, advocate for increased pro bono work by local attorneys, and improve planning and coordination of legal services delivery. It also strives to call attention to the importance of legal services for District residents and the significant disparity between the need for such services and the resources available to meet those needs.

OUR *Justice for All* PRIORITIES

We are advancing the following priorities to meet our goal of 100% access, where all District residents facing civil legal problems have access to some form of legal help, in partnership with legal services, the private bar, academia, philanthropy, and the community

SELF HELP

District residents will have access to high-quality, user-friendly, and accessible self-help information, forms, instructions, and services, whether they seek help online, at the courthouse, or in the community.



NAVIGATION

New & expanded navigator programs will enable trained, supervised individuals to help District residents without lawyers use self-help materials and navigate the court and other processes to preventing or resolve legal issues.

COORDINATED INTAKE

Champion a vision of coordinated intake where there is "no wrong door" for District residents seeking legal help and a spectrum of other services, including expanded and improved self-help.



COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Develop practical tools to better equip community partners to help community members identify, prevent, and resolve legal issues and connect them with services, information, and access points for legal help.

POLICY

Use the Commission's voice to strategically advance policies that improve access to justice, decrease the need for legal services, and improve the lives of individuals and communities served by legal services providers.



USER ENGAGEMENT

Develop and utilize tools that ensure community user feedback and input is integrated throughout planning and implementation of these prioritized activities.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Redouble our efforts to expand public, private, and pro bono resources to support our civil justice system.



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Access to Justice Commission

Prof. Peter B. Edelman (Chair)
Georgetown University Law Center

James J. Sandman (Vice Chair)
University of Pennsylvania Carey School of Law

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D.C. Superior Court

Dr. Cheryl Bailey
D.C. Courts

Hon. Corinne A. Beckwith
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Neighborhood Legal Services Program

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D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center

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District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH)

Abel Nuñez
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)

Hon. Vanessa Ruiz
District of Columbia Court of Appeals

Prof. Jessica Steinberg
George Washington University Law School

Aida Vindell
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COMMUNITY • CAREER • PROFESSION • PRACTICE MANAGEMENT • SERVICE

WASHINGTON LAWYER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA BAR

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

**Health Care
Equity Through
Medical-Legal
Partnerships**

**Why Medical Debt
Is a Justice Issue**

**Funding Civil
Legal Aid
in D.C.**

DCBAR

*Serving our members
so they can serve the community*

In Fight for Civil Legal Aid, Advocates Use Strength in Numbers

By John Funk

Earlier this year, when the mayor’s budget proposed a 60 percent cut — or roughly \$18 million — to civil legal aid funding in fiscal year 2024, legal and community leaders came out in full force to successfully lobby against it.

The broad public support for the restoration of funds for the D.C. Access to Justice Initiative, a public program administered by the DC Bar Foundation that impacts the lives of thousands of low-income Washingtonians, demonstrates the collaborations necessary to fulfill the Constitution’s promise of equal justice for all.

“I am proud to have successfully restored millions of dollars of funding for access to justice programs in this year’s budget,” says D.C. Councilmember Brooke Pinto, who championed the preservation of the initiative. “These vital programs help to ensure that all residents have access to the legal support, services, and protection they need to mitigate the long-term impact from acute situations, such as eviction and unemployment. I will continue collaborating with access to justice funding recipients to ensure they are able to continue their essential work to support District residents.”

Among the most vocal advocates for the restoration of funds was former D.C. Bar president Ellen Jakovic, who testified in April before the D.C. Council that the budget cut would be disastrous for the District, and taxpayers likely will be footing the bill for cleaning up the wreckage.

“Without public funding through the Access to Justice Initiative, our community’s challenges almost certainly will increase as unaddressed legal problems spiral into additional crises,” Jakovic said in a recent interview. “Providing help early in the legal process allows District residents to stay in their homes, protect their families, stabilize their lives, and recover



Patrice Gilbert Photography

Public appeals led by D.C. Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Nancy Drane (center) and other legal leaders, as well as support from D.C. Council Chair Phil Mendelson (left) and D.C. Council Judiciary and Public Safety Committee Chair Brooke Pinto, led to the restoration of civil legal aid funding for access to justice programs.

from the pandemic. Access to Justice Initiative funding also benefits our community, as it relieves the burden on government institutions to address these unmet needs.”

In the end, public appeals led by the D.C. Access to Justice Commission — as well as hours of testimony by dozens of community advocates, legal leaders, and those who directly benefit from free legal aid — helped make the case for the restoration of funding.



Susan Esserman

ANDREW MARKS*Law Offices of Andrew Marks PLLC*

Created in 2005, the D.C. Access to Justice Commission is charged with identifying and addressing barriers to the civil justice system for low- and moderate-income District residents. The commission's advocacy for sufficient funding to support access to civil legal aid — along with support from Pinto, who chairs the D.C. Council Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, Council Chair Phil Mendelson, and others — led to passage of a revised budget providing \$31 million for the Access to Justice Initiative in fiscal year 2024. "I believe the Access to Justice Initiative is one of the most effective government programs supporting low-income

residents in the District because it leverages many additional benefits to those in need," Mendelson says.

Nancy Drane, executive director of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission, says she was encouraged by the result. "It was wonderful to see all segments of our legal community — and beyond — recognize that access to legal assistance is a critical safety net service for the thousands of District residents who face life-changing challenges like housing instability, family violence, economic insecurity, family conflict, and more," Drane says.

'WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION'

While public funding for civil legal services is critical to increasing access to justice, private sector efforts are also essential. One example is the D.C. Access to Justice Commission's Raising the Bar in D.C. Campaign, which encourages local law firms of any size and even solo practitioners to support legal services in the District. This year, 40 firms were recognized for donating a record \$7.3 million to more than 40 local legal services organizations in 2022.

Andrew Marks, one of the founding members of the commission, was instrumental in the campaign's design. While the Washington legal community has always seen the value in supporting civil legal services for indigent residents, law firms weren't always sure exactly how to get involved or at what level, Marks says. The Raising the Bar in D.C. Campaign, launched in 2010, set achievable benchmarks for law firms to aspire to.

Because the benchmarks are percentages of firms' D.C. office revenue rather than specific dollar amounts, they are attainable by even the smallest of firms, including solo practices, that want to support local legal aid services, says Marks, a former D.C. Bar president and managing director of the Law Offices of Andrew Marks PLLC.

"We have an obligation. We're so privileged to live in this area and to be able to practice law in Washington, D.C.," Marks says. "We are the beneficiaries of the communities in which we live. I personally feel I have an obligation to give back, and I try to do that through my time, but also through my checkbook when I can."

Indeed, law firms in the District are "among the most generous in the nation in providing pro bono and financial support for legal services,"

according to the commission. "Because of this tradition of engagement, law firms are a crucial part of the legal services delivery system and valued partners in access to justice efforts," it states on its website.

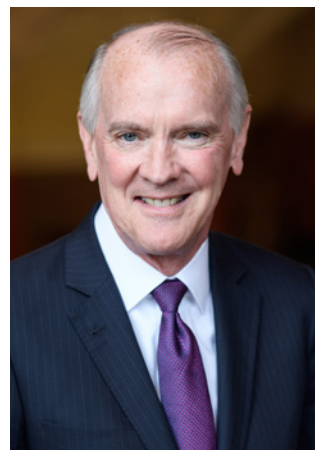
Year after year, law firms that make up the Raising the Bar Leadership Circle step up to increase financial support to civil legal aid organizations. Steptoe & Johnson LLP, for example, was one of the eight law firms that founded the campaign in 2010 and continues to be part of the Leadership Circle.

"Steptoe has always valued the partnership of remarkably talented, hard-working legal aid staff who do so much on the front lines of battling poverty in our community," says Steptoe Chair Gwendolyn Prothro Renigar. "Supporting these organizations financially, in addition to our pro bono work, ensures that high-quality legal representation can reach those who need it the most."

Despite firms' commitment, however, the D.C. Access to Justice Commission says, "Too many vulnerable District residents are forced to navigate the civil legal system alone, even when those things they most value are in jeopardy."

A 2019 commission report shows that thousands of litigants in the District's local courts proceed without legal representation — for example, 88 percent of tenants in the Landlord & Tenant Branch of D.C. Superior Court appeared pro se (compared to the 95 percent of landlords who had attorneys), and 97 percent of respondents in paternity and child support cases and 75 percent of plaintiffs in housing conditions cases lacked representation.

Drane says the D.C. legal community has a responsibility to ensure its most vulnerable neighbors have access to legal representation and other services they need. "Knowing the positive difference that legal representation can make in case outcomes, the fact that so many of our District neighbors experience the civil justice system without legal representation, should be a call to action for D.C. lawyers to do what they can — either through financial support or through pro bono — to ensure our legal community helps as many people as possible," she says.



Courtesy of James Sandman

JAMES SANDMAN*D.C. Access to Justice Commission***ANSWERING THE CALL FOR HELP**

Public funding and law firm contributions provide millions of dollars in support for the District's large network of legal services providers, but behind the push to make the civil legal justice system more accessible to historically underserved residents are also the thousands of individual lawyers who contribute both time and money to the cause. Legal Aid DC's Making Justice Real Campaign, for example, raised more than \$3 million in donations from individual attorneys in 2022.

Thousands of Bar members also contribute to the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, the District's largest provider of pro bono legal services. "From the largest charitable foundation to the lawyer who donates \$50 every

Raise the Bar for Access to Justice

Join the 40 firms already in the D.C. Access to Justice Commission's Raising the Bar in D.C. Leadership Circle. Qualification is based on two things:

- Providing financial support to the campaign's list of 40+ eligible legal services organizations during the calendar year, and
- Calculating whether your firm's total giving to these organizations during the year meets pre-established "benchmark" percentages of the firm's average D.C. office revenue.

You can plan ahead! Because the percentage is measured against the average of prior years' revenue, firms can calculate what amount of giving will qualify at the desired level — Platinum, Gold, or Silver.

The campaign is based on percentage of revenue, so firms of all sizes can participate.

To learn more and get a how-to on calculating whether your firm qualifies, visit dcaccesstojustice.org/raising-the-bar.

December, every single donor is important to us. At the same time, we never forget that, since the Pro Bono Center's founding, our largest source of support has been donations from individual lawyers," says Pro Bono Center Executive Director Kelli Neptune.

Volunteer lawyers play a crucial role in ensuring that District residents have access to needed legal services, says James Sandman, vice chair of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission and president emeritus of the Legal Services Corporation.

"Many lawyers will cite a pro bono case as the most gratifying work they've ever done," Sandman says. Some attorneys are reluctant to volunteer due to a "fear factor" stemming from a lack of expertise in landlord-tenant or family law, Sandman says, but "you have people who will mentor you, people to consult with."

Marks, who has experience with civil legal aid work from many viewpoints — as a former partner at Crowell & Moring for 26 years, founder of his own small firm, and former president of the DC Bar Foundation — underscores the impact of individual volunteer lawyers on the community.

"I think [when] doing pro bono work as a young lawyer, you really come to appreciate the wide range of needs in the community and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of people who cannot afford a lawyer," says Marks. "You realize how much of an impact you can have on people who are faced with serious legal issues that so affect the quality of their lives. It is personally gratifying to do this type of work, and it gives you profound appreciation for the civil legal aid lawyers who devote their lives to working on behalf of the neediest members of our community. You can't help but want to find a way to support them."

IT'S ALL CONNECTED

When it comes to expanding access to justice, collaborations among various community stakeholders are important because so many issues are interrelated in ways that aren't always obvious until multiple advocates come to the table, says Sandman.

A significant impediment to access to justice, Sandman points out, is the insularity of the legal profession. Although lawyers have an ethical obligation to increase access to justice, getting nonlawyers involved — from social workers to medical service providers — will help expand the ability of legal services providers to serve the District's neediest population.

"One of the most important reasons people don't get help for their civil legal problems is that they don't self-identify their problem as a legal problem," Sandman explains. "So, a person who has respiratory problems caused by substandard housing conditions, mold, infestations, for example, may identify their problem as a health problem, not recognizing that they also have legal problems. They have remedies against the landlord. They need someone to make that connection."

"It works both ways," says Jenadee Nanini, a managing attorney for the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center and Family Law Assistance Network. "We connect with organizations that provide education, mentoring, mental health, medical, and reentry services, as well as with community centers, churches, and schools. We help providers identify a potential legal issue, so they can refer their clients to us."

"While assisting a family law client, we may identify a need for mental health or substance abuse services or food assistance and make an appropriate referral. If we can serve the entire client, holistically, we can break through systemic barriers," Nanini adds.

Together, public funding, contributions from law firms and individual attorneys, efforts by legal services providers, and community involvement help make equal access to justice a reality for all District residents. 🏡

John Funk is interim communications and marketing specialist for the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center.

GET TRAINED TO SERVE OTHERS

Understanding Parentage and Child Support in the District

November 15

12:30–2 p.m. (Virtual)

Housing Training: Eviction Defense, Housing Conditions Calendar, and Eviction Record Sealing

Part 1: December 4

Part 2: December 11

12–2 p.m. (In person and Zoom)

Services Involved in Family Court

December 6

12:30–1:30 p.m. (Virtual)

To learn more and to register, visit dcb.org/pro-bono/resources-and-training/pro-bono-center-training-program.