



**Budget Oversight Hearing, Mayor's Proposed FY25 Budget
Before the D.C. Council Committee of the Whole**

**Written Testimony of Nancy E. Drane, Executive Director
District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission**

May 3, 2024

Chairman Mendelson, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nancy Drane, and I am the Executive Director of the [District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission](#) ("[Commission](#)").ⁱ The Commission was created by the District of Columbia Court of Appeals in 2005 to address the scarcity of civil legal services for low- and moderate-income District residents and to reduce the barriers these litigants face in navigating the civil justice system. The Commission is chaired by Professor Peter B. Edelman of Georgetown University Law Center and Vice Chaired by James J. Sandman, President Emeritus of the Legal Services Corporation and Distinguished Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Its members include representatives from the D.C. Court of Appeals, D.C. Superior Court and D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings, past Presidents of the D.C. Bar and other private bar leaders, legal services organizations, law schools, community-based organizations, and other local leaders.

The Commission appreciates the opportunity to submit this written testimony today in support of the Access to Justice Initiative ("Initiative"). Joined by the D.C. Bar Foundation, the D.C. Courts, thirty-six current and past Presidents of the D.C. Bar, the D.C. Consortium of Legal Services Providers, the Washington Council of Lawyers, thirty-plus grantee organizations, twenty-eight of the District's leading law firms, other community leaders, and most importantly, clients served by the program, we call on the Council to reverse a \$20.2M or 67% reduction in the Mayor's proposed FY25 budget and restore Initiative funding to the FY23 and FY24 levels of \$31.7 million.

At last week’s OVSJG budget oversight hearing, we heard about the consequences of this cut and the way it will undermine community priorities we all share and be devastating for District residents in crisis, the non-profit organizations that serve them, and the hundreds of District agencies, community groups, and health systems that rely on their partnership. *(For a list of just some of those partners, see [HERE](#) and attached.)* We’ve attached an overview of that testimony. We heard that a cut means:

- Thousands fewer clients will be served across the entire spectrum of vital legal needs, meaning: Instability for families and children without help in custody, child support, legal support for kinship care arrangements, and other legal help that keep families together
- A provider having to turn away 1 in 3 domestic violence survivors seeking life-saving services
- Hundreds of District households uprooted by eviction
- The potential loss of the District’s only dedicated workers’ right clinic
- Less support for returning citizens seeking employment and stability
- Less or no support for elderly residents and residents with disabilities who want to live in the community
- Gutting of the Community Legal Interpreter Bank, leaving non-English speakers isolated and at risk
- Significant loss of dedicated, experienced staff, potentially 1/3 to 1/2 of legal staff at some organizations
- Some funded projects and organizations could cease to exist entirely

Our written testimony here includes statements from Initiative grantees describing the impact of their work and fears for residents who depend on them if funding is not restored. We’ve also attached testimony from the Chief Judges of the D.C. Courts and the D.C. Bar.

Over half of funded projects (35 projects across 12 providers) rely on the Initiative for 75% or more of the project’s funding. *(For a sense of the impact of proposed cuts, see [HERE](#) and attached.)* The Commission’s written testimony today will provide you with a broad overview of the Initiative and its work. One of the first things the Commission did after its founding was to partner with the Council to create the Initiative in fiscal year 2007 to provide public support to make civil legal services available to District residents. The Initiative is under the purview of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants. OVSJG works with the D.C. Bar Foundation (“DCBF”) that in turn has the responsibility to administer the program and disburse these important funds. The Commission is extremely grateful to the Council for its long-standing support of the Initiative and for championing it from the beginning – especially last year when, like this year, the program faced significant proposed cuts.

The Council has consistently deemed the Initiative a worthy investment because it is a program that works. It makes our community stronger and it promotes racial justice. It keeps families safely and stably housed. It makes our neighborhoods more secure by helping people through personal crisis. It promotes economic opportunity, not just for those individuals served, but by assuring current and future government savings. The Initiative is critical because unlike our criminal justice system, there is no right to a lawyer in civil cases where as many as 97% of litigants don't have a lawyer, even when their family, home, safety, or health is at risk. Most District residents with lower incomes simply cannot afford to pay for legal services. This inability to pay particularly impacts District residents of color, with white households in the District having 81 times the wealth of Black households, and 22 times the wealth of Latinx households.ⁱⁱ Today's testimony will show that giving District residents access to legal help leads to better individual and community outcomes.

With FY25 funding at \$31.7 million, the Initiative's three components would offer a comprehensive strategy to serve District residents with civil legal needs:

\$20.35 million for the *Access to Justice Grants Program* to continue to support the following projects: (1) \$16.35 million for *access to justice grants* to meet increasing demand for civil legal services in communities of highly concentrated poverty; expand representation in housing matters; and maintain a legal interpreter bank; (2) \$3 million to support efforts to *prevent eviction*; and (3) \$1 million to support the continued development of a *coordinated intake and referral system* to make it easier for residents to access legal services. Funds would also support evaluations to better measure the impact and effectiveness of the program in meeting community needs.

\$11 million for the *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* to fund legal representation in eviction-related proceedings at a time of increasing need, as well as to support the continued evaluation of the program.

\$350,000 for the *D.C. Poverty Lawyers Loan Repayment Program* to assist grantee lawyers with student loan debt. This enables the work of attorneys to deliver needed services, ensures a high quality, diverse pool of legal services professionals, and serves as an important retention and recruitment tool for legal services employers.

Today's testimony will demonstrate the breadth of the Initiative. In 2023 alone, funded providers served 40,000 District residents across all eight wardsⁱⁱⁱ in areas like housing, family law, education, disability, consumer protection, domestic violence, employment, public benefits, discrimination, health, immigration, and more. (*For a snapshot of Initiative funding by ward, click [HERE](#) and attached.*) This isn't just about appearing in court – although it was for many. It is also about knocks on doors offering help instead of waiting for individuals to appear at the courthouse alone, and sometimes allowing them to stay out of court altogether; addressing legal issues early to prevent them from escalating and recurring; clinics and know your rights sessions being offered in the community; courthouse-based programs that promote fairness and procedural justice in our courts; safety planning and protection; cutting through obstacles to secure needed public benefits; and helping families resolve conflict.

Below are some highlights of these essential programs.

Keeping District Families Stably Housed

The Initiative helps maintain the District's unique character through a continuum of strategies that keep District neighbors safely and stably housed in their community; over 50% of funding supports housing-related work. The Initiative plays a facilitative role in addressing the District's eviction crisis and fostering multi-sector collaboration between legal services providers, the courts, community-based organizations, other community leaders, and the District government. Efforts include those targeted at preserving inter-generational homes, preventing foreclosure and eviction, and providing legal help that keeps District residents housed in affordable, healthy, safe, and discrimination-free environments.

Our *Appendix A* details the context and quality of this work, as will other testimony you'll hear today, but here are a few highlights:

- 87% of tenants facing eviction represented by *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* grantees who wanted to stay in their homes retained possession of their unit (and 76% overall); those that did not retain possession still largely had favorable outcomes.^{iv} 89% of those facing voucher termination saw those terminations rescinded. A coordinated phone line launched by CLCPP grantees in June 2020 has conducted over 10,000 intakes since its inception.^v Since program data has been collected, CLCPP grantees have provided legal assistance to 8,200+ low-income D.C. residents.^{vi}

- The *Access to Justice Grants Program* funds eviction prevention strategies aimed at curtailing evictions and preventing eviction filings from occurring, including over 6,800 knocks on doors to offer help to those on the brink of eviction, over 5,600 outreach letters sent, and 664 community education sessions with over 12,000 attendees in 2023.^{vii}
- The *Access to Justice Grants Program* also supports other housing-related projects focused on keeping District residents stably housed in affordable, healthy, safe, and discrimination-free environments, such as foreclosure-related work and work done in partnership with District medical providers that addresses environmental hazards and negative housing conditions that exacerbate childhood asthma and other chronic health conditions.

Promoting Public Safety and Community Resilience

The Initiative is a critical component of a holistic approach to public safety. Left unaddressed, civil legal needs make our community vulnerable to crisis and less safe. Through Initiative interventions funded through the *Access to Justice Grants Program*, communities are stronger and more resilient. Initiative programs nourish the District’s safety net and promote community well-being by addressing family instability, supporting youth, giving voice to survivors of crime, serving returning citizens, and addressing core areas individuals need to thrive.

Our *Appendix B* details the context and quality of this work, as will other testimony you’ll hear today, but here are a few highlights:

- *Keeping individuals and families safe* through legal services and crisis safety planning for survivors of domestic violence, gender-based violence, and sex trafficking and exploitation.
- *Re-entry support for returning citizens* to help them transition back to the community after incarceration and navigate legal challenges like expungement services, both of which prevent recidivism.
- *Promoting education opportunities for youth* including legal support to students and parents to keep students invested in their educations, prevent school exclusion, and ensure access to a free and appropriate education, including court-involved youth.
- *Promoting family stability* through early intervention legal services for children and families at risk of entering foster care and other court-involved families.
- *Managing health crises* by helping District residents secure public benefits, gain access to housing, food, and medications, identify legal remedies to health problems like asthma, and by providing specialized services through medical-legal partnerships with District health systems.
- *Specialized support for individuals with disabilities*, including ensuring safe and healthy environments and combatting discrimination.

- *Assisting seniors aging in place* with estate planning, public benefits support, combatting fraud and abuse, and safekeeping intergenerational transfer of property.
- *Supporting the District's growing immigrant population* with legal help in combatting notario fraud, protecting unaccompanied minors, offering culturally specific legal services to targeted populations within the immigrant community, and helping the District respond to the nearly 11,500 migrants who have arrived in the District on buses sent from southern border states since April 2022.

Promoting Economic Opportunity for Individuals and the Community

Initiative programs funded through the *Access to Justice Grants Program* also lessen economic risk and inopportunity for District residents, promote economic security and community well-being, and lessen government burdens that would occur if these issues remained unaddressed.

Our *Appendix C* details the context and quality of this work, as will other testimony you'll hear today, but here are a few highlights:

- *Stabilizing credit for low-income residents and protecting critically needed funds* by fighting predatory lending and illegal debt collection schemes.
- *Protecting wages and jobs* by helping District residents recover stolen wages, fight discrimination and harassment, and seek assistance from employment-related programs.
- *Promoting economic security and lessening government burdens* by ensuring D.C. residents secure benefits to which they are entitled.
- *Preserving intergenerational homes* through heirs property and other probate-related work.
- *Offering services to individuals experiencing homelessness* to gain access to housing, employment, and other benefits.
- *Reducing health-related costs* by addressing health-harming problems that can be resolved through legal solutions.

Supporting Language Access

The *Access to Justice Grants Program* also funds the Community Legal Interpreter Bank, a one-of-a-kind, nationally recognized model operated by Ayuda that enables low-income residents who are limited English proficient or Deaf to access services from dozens of District nonprofit legal services providers. This is imperative to promote equity and procedural justice where significant percentages of Initiative clients have limited or no English proficiency.^{viii} Providers describe the Bank as an “indispensable” partner in their outreach and community engagement efforts, allowing them

to conduct “Know Your Rights” trainings over Zoom using simultaneous interpretation. Ensuring that these virtual meetings and presentations go smoothly requires training of the interpreters and the legal services providers. The Community Legal Interpreter Bank^{ix} offers:

- Dedicated support to funded organizations to ensure legal services are provided in the client’s native language, with the most common languages being Spanish, Amharic, and French. 35 organizations were served in FY23.
- Interpretation services offered by professionals specially trained in legal language interpretation, with 7,500 telephone interpretations offered in FY23.
- Community education and other documents offered in multiple languages to promote client use and understanding, with 440 documents translated in FY23.

Meeting the Growing Community Need for Legal Help

Despite the District’s significant investment in the Initiative over time, the community need for these critical, free legal services continues to outpace available resources. Our *Appendix D* details pressing community needs, including:

- *The need for representation in civil cases in our courts and tribunals is great, where the percentages of those appearing in court without a lawyer are as high as 75-97%.*
- *Eviction remains at crisis level, with 2023 eviction case filings greater than the prior year, grantee organizations facing a 50% increase in calls for assistance, and U.S. Census data suggesting an affordability crisis among District tenants.*
- *Domestic violence remains a chronic, growing area of need, with case filings rising and grantee organizations and their partners seeing record number requests for legal help.*
- *Economic stressors persist, with consumer defaults at their highest levels since the 2009 economic depression. Calls for help and debt pressures are increasing among District residents who lack a financial safety net to withstand the crisis, as inflation outpaces wage and benefit increases for many.*
- *Family conflict often requires legal intervention, with an increasing number of District families, in the thousands, seeking legal help.*
- *Protecting intergenerational wealth in D.C. families is a priority where we see more and more District families at risk and ill-equipped to navigate related legal processes alone.*
- *Ensuring language access, with the Community Legal Interpreter Bank already unable to meet demand for translation services under current funding levels.*

Retaining Highly Qualified, Experienced Lawyers to Serve District Residents

The Initiative also provides additional support to keep the civil legal aid network in the District of the highest quality. The *D.C. Poverty Lawyer Loan Repayment Assistance Program* is a critical tool for maintaining a talented, passionate, and diverse corps of legal services lawyers. With an average indebtedness of approximately \$100,000 and the average salary of enrolled participants at \$72,545,^x this program incentivizes attorneys to devote their skills to helping the District’s vulnerable population and helps legal services employers recruit and retain high-quality, experienced staff.

Making the Civil Justice System More Accessible

The unifying nature of the Initiative and DCBF’s role in administering it also provides opportunities to leverage resources to maximize impact. You’ll hear today about DCBF’s efforts to make our system more accessible through coordinated intake and referral – promoting the vision that for District residents, there will be ‘no wrong door’ to accessing legal help. No other jurisdiction has attempted an approach at a scale DCBF plans for the District.

Through DCBF’s leadership, the Initiative also promotes formal and informal network building among grantees. Organizations have launched networks where they come together to collaborate, learn, and improve.^{xi} Resources are used more efficiently when organizations are well-positioned to partner, and networks promote collective learning, the adoption of consistent and effective best practices, and economy of scale. Together with program evaluation, DCBF is promoting continuous improvement towards matching community need with impact.

The larger community impact of the Initiative is significant. Funded programs help form the safety net in many District communities, such as those east of the Anacostia River, where the number of available attorneys has doubled since program inception. This not only eases the transportation burden for low-income residents needing legal help, but it has also resulted in these organizations becoming known and trusted parts of the community. The funds promote creative community alliances such as medical-legal partnerships, which place attorneys alongside medical staff at some of the District’s most high-volume providers of primary medical care. Legal services providers have developed numerous partnerships with trusted community partners to deliver legal information and

better connect District residents to legal services. Over 200 District agencies and community organizations partner with Initiative funded organizations.

Maximizing Other Resources

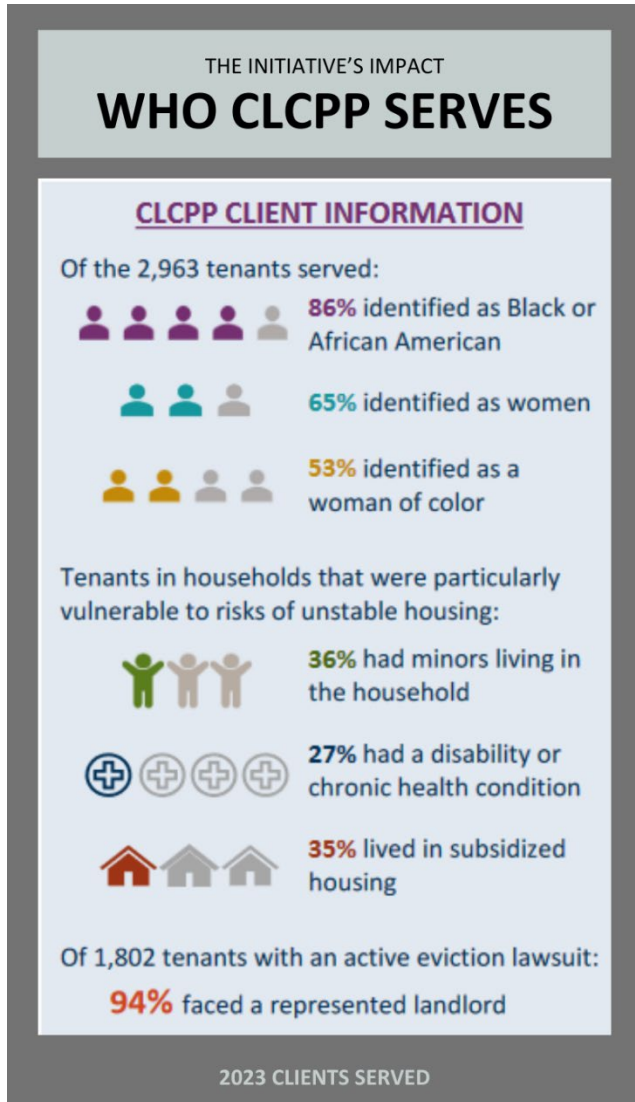
The District government's leadership in committing these public funds has also allowed legal services organizations to maximize a range of other resources. For example, legal services providers magnify the impact of every public dollar invested through the recruitment, training, and support of private lawyers performing pro bono service in the District. Pro bono contributions are indispensable to meeting client needs but are only possible when there is a stable legal services network to identify cases, develop resources, and provide training and supervision.^{xii} Without these public funds and the stable legal services infrastructure they assure, these important law firm resources might go untapped, and thousands more clients denied the assistance of counsel.

The District's commitment to civil justice also serves as a model to all segments of the community. The increase in funding from both the public and private spheres, commensurate with their joint commitment to equal access for all, is crucial. The Commission is grateful that the private bar has increasingly become a partner in funding access to justice work and that its direct contributions to legal services organizations also have increased. Each year, the Commission recognizes the contributions of the legal community through the *Raising the Bar in D.C.* campaign.^{xiii} The Commission believes that this robust private-public partnership has been greatly incentivized by the District government's long-standing support.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The services offered through the Initiative help build stronger, more stable District neighborhoods where its residents can thrive. The District government's vision in creating the Initiative recognizes its obligation to ensure its residents have access to civil justice and the role of such support in a comprehensive, public safety strategy.

APPENDIX A: KEEPING DISTRICT FAMILIES STABLY HOUSED

Initiative funds support a continuum of strategies that aim to keep District families safely housed. The *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* (“CLCPP”) provides legal help and representation to tenants facing eviction matters in D.C. Courts and in other eviction-related proceedings; the *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports additional prevention-based strategies and partnerships aimed at stopping eviction filings from occurring; and the *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports other housing-related projects aimed at keeping District residents stably housed in affordable, healthy, safe, and discrimination-free environments.



NPC Research, Annual Evaluation Report to the Council of the District of Columbia and the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program (CLCPP) (February 2024)

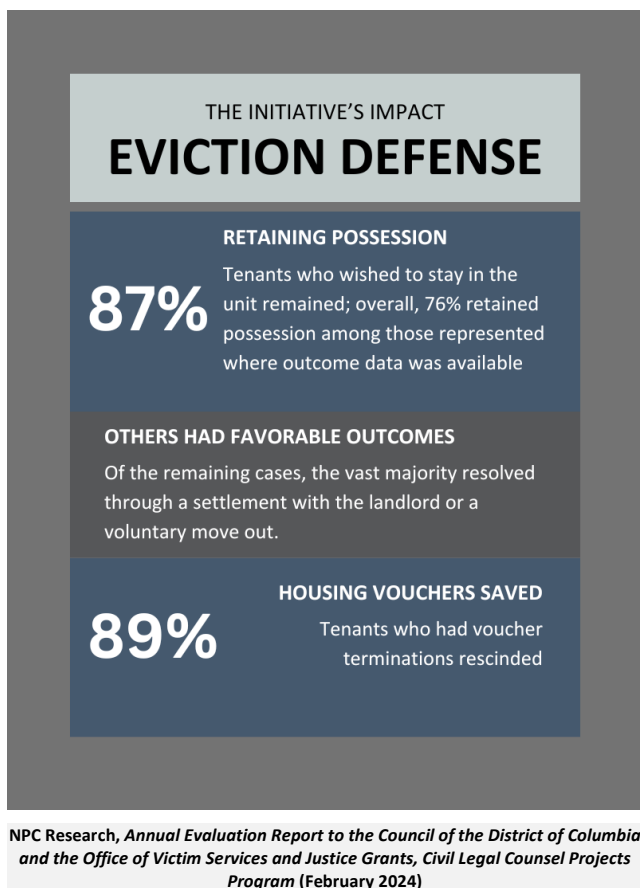
The need for expanded support in this area is urgent as ever. An increasing number of District residents, more than 44,000 in 2022, are “severely housing cost burdened,” meaning that they spent half or more of their income on rent.^{xiv} Twelve percent of District residents (or 82,452) are experiencing housing insecurity, meaning housing unaffordability, inadequate housing, or frequent and unwanted moves – with that burden largely falling on families, children, and youth; Black and Hispanic residents; and Ward 7 and 8 residents.^{xv} In its 2023 publication of the annual *Out of Reach* report, the National Low Income Housing Coalition ranked the District as the sixth most expensive jurisdiction in the nation regarding rental housing, with the fair market rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in D.C. at \$1,838, and monthly income necessary to afford this rent without experiencing rental cost burden at \$6,126.^{xvi} In contrast, the median household income among CLCPP clients served is \$1,200 per month, with the median monthly income among all clients served since 2019 at \$1,054.^{xvii}

The Initiative’s resources have positioned DCBF and Initiative grantees to play a facilitative role in addressing the District’s eviction crisis and fostering multi-sector collaboration between legal services providers, the courts, community-based organizations, other community leaders, and the District government.

The *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* ensures District tenants facing eviction matters in D.C. Courts have the legal help they need to protect their rights, assert legitimate defenses, and negotiate agreements that allow them to maintain their

housing with achievable terms. The critical nature of this support is demonstrated by the work accomplished through CLCPP, as outlined in greater depth in DCBF’s comprehensive evaluation reports.^{xviii}

CLCPP grantees jointly maintain the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network (“LTLAN”), a coordinated and accessible telephone-based intake and referral system for low-income litigants to be connected with an attorney from a CLCPP grantee organization. Grantees ensure LTLAN information is widely available, including through partnerships with community organizations, in mailed court documents about upcoming hearings, and through announcements during court hearings themselves. Since its launch in June 2020, LTLAN has fielded calls from over 10,000 tenants and small landlords seeking help.^{xix} In 2023, 90% of clients reached CLCPP grantee organizations through LTLAN (64%) or called a funded organization directly (26%).^{xx}



CLCPP grantees have a regular presence in court hearings to connect with unrepresented tenants to offer services. This includes remote hearings, where CLCPP grantees observe how the remote process is working for low-income tenants and offer suggestions for improvement. Judicial officers have found the CLCPP’s role instrumental in serving court users during this challenging time. Robust data collection for the CLCPP program began in August 2019. Since that time and through 2023, CLCPP grantees have closed 10,158 eviction, voucher termination, and other eviction-related cases, providing legal assistance to 8,217 low-income D.C. residents.^{xxi}

CLCPP grantees participate in D.C. Superior Court’s Landlord Tenant Working Group, its Landlord Tenant Rules Committee, and its Eviction Diversion Stakeholders Group to provide recommendations to the Court on process improvements. CLCPP grantees also continue to play a critical role in advocating for legislative protections for tenants.

In order to leverage funds effectively, CLCPP organizations collaborate to train pro bono attorneys, referring cases for representation whenever possible. Each year, CLCPP organizations host a five-part eviction law training series attended by pro bono attorneys and offer a series of courthouse tours.^{xxii}

The *Access to Justice Grants Program’s* additional investment in eviction prevention allows DCBF and Initiative grantees to also pursue *prevention*-based strategies to halt evictions, including more directly involving non-legal, community-based organizations as partners. Through the Eviction Prevention in the Community (EPIC) project, CLCPP providers track eviction case filings and share this

information with community-based partners, who engage in canvassing efforts to knock on the doors of at-risk tenants to educate them about the eviction process, encourage them to participate in their case (not default), and share LTLAN contact information for them to connect with legal services.

Grantee organizations work to identify those tenants at risk of eviction by requesting and tracking data on pre-court notices served on tenants, new case filings, upcoming hearings, new judgments, and new writs, and then using this data to inform coordinated outreach with tenant canvassers, housing counselors, and relevant government agencies, including the Office of the Tenant Advocate.



D.C. Bar Foundation, CLCPP Grantees

Grantees ensure tenants are aware of their rights that may allow them to avoid eviction, critical when tenants often misunderstand relevant rules and renter protections that apply to them. This outreach includes sending postcards with tenants’ rights information to buildings where tenants may be facing eviction; holding outreach sessions with tenant associations, tenant organizers, and other community service organizations; holding pop up events on-site at buildings; and using social media, mail, and community partners to educate the public. Grantees also educate tenant organizers about the coordinated intake line they maintain so that this information is shared with tenants. Grantees participate in training and outreach events held by other community organizations, including Housing Counseling Services, the Latino Economic Development Center, D.C. Public Libraries, D.C. Public Schools Early Childhood program, local hospitals, and various school groups.

Initiative grantees approach this work holistically, also working to connect District residents with related supports that could help them become stably housed, such as disability, unemployment, and financial planning if facing long term financial issues; and help with issues that may affect housing stability, such as deep cleaning and therapy intervention for hoarding. With additional funding, Initiative grantees have been able to hire staff whose duties include connecting tenants to services that will help them remain stably housed.

DCBF co-leads the D.C. Eviction Prevention Working Group with the Greater Washington Community Foundation and with support from the Urban Institute, a group set up after the White House’s Eviction Prevention Summit. Here, Initiative grantees help lead strategic partnering between lawyers, housing providers and landlords, the District government, housing counselors and organizers, and the Court to reach tenants in the community with a goal of avoiding eviction. The Working Group has developed a multi-faceted collaborative framework that calls for increased community outreach and

education, more partnering between Initiative grantees and community-based canvassers, and more engagement with housing providers and tenants alike before landlords file eviction actions.

Finally, securing affordable housing goes beyond eviction prevention. The *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports numerous other housing strategies grantees employ to keep District residents in safe, healthy housing, including:

THE INITIATIVE'S IMPACT
HEALTHIER HOMES

ATTACKING HEALTH DISPARITIES
Children with asthma in Wards 7 and 8 are 20 times more likely to end up in the ER for asthma than a child growing up in Ward 3

LEGAL INTERVENTIONS MEAN HEALTHIER CHILDREN
Children's health improves – sometimes within days – after the conditions are addressed.

COMBATTING HOUSING CODE VIOLATIONS
Mold, lead, and vermin exacerbate asthma and lead to emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS ARE CLEAR
A legal intervention, alongside medical treatment, keeps children out of the hospital and emergency room and results in significant Medicaid cost avoidance – on average \$10,000 in the first 18 months alone for housing conditions cases

Children's Law Center

- helping tenants facing environmental health hazards and unsafe and unhealthy housing conditions secure health-saving improvements from landlords and property owners through individual and building-wide advocacy;
- keeping families in their historic communities through work in foreclosure and estate administration at a time when intergenerational housing and communities are at risk of gentrification;
- promoting housing preservation by safeguarding low-equity housing cooperatives, tenant organizations, and other groups that keep District residents in their homes;
- supporting fair housing and combatting housing-based discrimination;
- keeping tenants in their housing by combatting illegal rent increases and unlawful voucher terminations; and
- working with individuals experiencing homelessness to provide holistic, legal support to address access to public benefits, estate planning/probate, housing, and record sealing.

APPENDIX B: PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

Initiative funding supports a wide range of programs that are specifically targeted to promote public safety, address family instability, and improve community well-being through the *Access to Justice Grants Program*. Left unaddressed, these issues make our community vulnerable to crisis. Through successful intervention, they promote community resiliency and stability. Some examples of the ways the program promotes public safety and resilience include:

- *Keeping individuals and families safe.* Grantees offer trauma-informed services to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in all eight wards. Grantees have mobilized to offer support in the form of emergency legal services and crisis safety planning and have launched new and expanded virtual and in-person clinics to meet the growing need. Court-based services are essential when the most recently available data^{xxiii} show that 88% of petitioners in domestic violence matters seeking civil protection orders lack counsel. Specialized services also support survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and victims of crime.
- *Re-entry support for returning citizens.* Several projects provide support to individuals transitioning back to the community after being detained in local or Federal juvenile, residential, or adult facilities through legal support in education, custody, employment, consumer, and post-incarceration issues. Specialized support for women returning from incarceration in issues like expungement, name change, probation issues, child support, child custody, consumer issues, and more is also offered. Programs also offer support in expungement and record sealing. A 2020 study found that there is a significantly lower recidivism rate among those who have their criminal records expunged. The study also found “sharp upturns” in wage and employment trajectories for those who obtained expungement relief, finding that “on average, within one year of expungement wages go up by over 22% versus the pre-expungement trajectory.”^{xxiv}
- *Promoting education opportunities for youth.* Initiative funds support legal services to parents and students to keep students invested in their educations and ensure that they are free from school exclusion and have access to a free and appropriate education, including special education and related services, language access, and other required supports to promote successful educational and life outcomes. Other services specifically target court-involved youth or youth at risk of court involvement.
- *Promoting family stability.* The Initiative supports a wide range of programs that promote family stability. At least three programs aim to prevent children from entering the foster care system through early intervention legal services at key points of instability, legal support for relative caregivers seeking to step in to care for children whose parents are unable to care for them, and support to parents whose families are at risk of entering the foster care system. A network of providers also provides representation to District residents trying to resolve family conflict in the D.C. Superior Court, with a separate program aimed at providing specialized, trauma-informed support to children involved in custody disputes who are identified as being in critical need of representation. Representation of parents and primary caregivers with child support issues is also provided, notable where 80-97% of litigants traditionally pursue these cases without legal help.^{xxv} In 2023, the Family Law Assistance Network (FLAN) expanded beyond remote services to meet the demand for legal assistance. In addition to operating a

Hotline and email referral system four days per week, FLAN now operates an in-person walk-in center within D.C. Superior Court, with plans to staff this in-person on site additional days per week in 2024.

- *Managing health crises.* Funds support medical-legal partnerships that place lawyers alongside medical staff at some of the District’s highest-volume primary care providers, including projects that offer specialized services to children, pregnant and postpartum individuals, and the transgender community. Legal services providers continue to help low-income D.C. residents stay stable and healthy by pursuing and maintaining local and Federal benefits and gaining access to housing, food, and medications as they continue to identify legal remedies for health problems like uncontrolled asthma due to mold-infested homes.
- *Specialized support for individuals with disabilities.* The Initiative supports a wide range of projects aimed at serving individuals with disabilities, including ensuring the least-restrictive options for those facing undue adult guardianship, assisting those facing housing challenges due to mental illness or behavioral challenges, and combatting discrimination based on disability or medical status.
- *Assisting seniors aging in place.* Low-income seniors get support in drafting wills and advance directives, renewing public benefits, fighting scams, and dealing with housing-related issues. Probate is a long-standing gap in our civil legal services network. While for years there was only one legal services provider offering services in probate matters, expanded Initiative funds have allowed more legal services providers to develop a practice in this area. Low-income, Black, and Latinx populations are less likely to have wills and estate plans, leading to complex probate proceedings after a death in the family and threatening intergenerational transfer of property. Legal help to navigate these complicated systems is essential.
- *Support to the District’s growing immigrant population.* Initiative funds support legal help to combat notario fraud, protect unaccompanied minors, offer culturally specific legal services to targeted populations within the immigrant community, and help the District respond to the nearly 11,500 migrants who have arrived in the District on buses sent from southern border states since April 2022. The work not only navigates the complexities of immigration challenges but also prioritizes the safety, security, and holistic well-being of migrants. By providing essential legal services, fostering cultural competence, and building community networks, this work contributes significantly to the successful integration of recently arrived migrants into the community.

APPENDIX C: PROMOTING ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY

Access to Justice Grants Program funding also lessens economic risk and inopportunity and promote community well-being and stability:

THE INITIATIVE'S IMPACT
ECONOMIC IMPACT

PROMOTING INDIVIDUAL SECURITY
One program kept \$1.4 million in the pockets of 767 families facing debt and consumer cases last year.

BENEFITS SECURED
Another program reports that the equivalent of just under 2.5 lawyers secured over \$850,000 in vital public benefits for their clients.

MEDICAID SAVINGS FOR THE COMMUNITY
One grantee tracked its impact and found that community savings include \$14 million in Medicaid costs avoided over three years by keeping children out of hospitals and emergency rooms. A legal intervention, alongside medical treatment, keeps children out of the hospital and emergency room and results in significant Medicaid cost avoidance – on average \$10,000 in the first 18 months alone for housing conditions cases

- *Stabilizing credit for low-income residents and helping protect critically needed funds.* Funded programs help residents fight predatory lending and illegal debt collection schemes and avert negative court judgments and credit reports, which can affect housing and employment opportunities – including focused community efforts in Wards 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8. They also seek to avert or minimize the extraction of wealth from D.C. residents by debt collectors, which occurs disproportionately against Black and Latinx D.C. residents. The District saw an alarming number of these consumer problems before the pandemic, and providers have since faced more consumer and debt-related legal issues as billing cycles and wage loss create a toxic personal financial environment for thousands of already vulnerable D.C. residents. Post-pandemic, providers are addressing increased consumer and collections cases for medical and other debt; health care has become the country's largest source of debt in collections.

These concerns are particularly acute for the undocumented, who have always been highly susceptible to exploitation and fraud. Six Initiative grantees partnered to establish the D.C. Debt Collection Hotline, which has already served thousands of residents, and, as cases continue to spike, is the phone number provided by D.C. Superior Court to litigants facing debt collection lawsuits. One program kept \$1.4 million in the pockets of 767 families facing debt and consumer cases last year.

- *Protecting wages and jobs.* These funds help teach low-income workers their rights, ensure they receive the wages they have earned and help them recover stolen wages and fight discrimination and harassment. Unemployment in the District has always been high, with a disproportionate impact on people of color. Requests for legal assistance have clustered around unemployment insurance, terminations, and failures to pay wages or other benefits. The most recent (pre-pandemic) data shows that litigants in unemployment-related matters at the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings are unrepresented by counsel 91% of the time.^{xxvi} Specialized employment programs support working mothers within the District's immigrant community and those seeking assistance in applying for paid family leave benefits, and address discriminatory practices in the workplace in order to reduce income inequality and the racial income gap.

- *Preserving intergenerational homes through heirs property and other probate-related work.* The District has prioritized maintaining and growing Black homeownership. The ability to navigate the probate system can mean the difference between a family keeping a multigenerational home in D.C. or losing it and being forced to leave the community. A lack of legal support in probate matters (as high as 97% in some types of cases) has been a long-standing civil justice gap, but a growing number of Initiative projects offer support in this area.
- *Promoting economic security.* Helping District residents secure benefits to which they are entitled has always been an important part of this program. Providers play a critical role in working with government agencies like DHS and DHCF to ensure that benefit programs are accessible to the client community. This work is effective – the equivalent of just under 2.5 lawyers at one program secured more than \$850,000 in vital public benefits for their clients. There is a large gap in services for District residents navigating issues at OAH, which hears public benefits cases such as unemployment insurance, TANF, SNAP, rental subsidies, shelter services, and health benefits – a gap that providers struggle to fill.^{xxvii} There also is funding to support services to those experiencing homelessness to provide holistic, legal support to address issues ranging from public benefits, estate planning, probate, housing, and record sealing.
- *Reducing health-related costs* by addressing health-harming problems that can be resolved through legal solutions. For example, grantee programs help District families address housing code violations or other environmental health hazards that exacerbate medical conditions like asthma. One grantee tracked its impact and found that community savings include \$14 million in Medicaid costs avoided over three years by keeping children out of hospitals and emergency rooms.

APPENDIX D: ADDRESSING COMMUNITY NEED

Despite the District’s significant investment in the Initiative over time, the community need for these critical, free legal services continues to outpace available resources. Even funding at \$31.7 million is inadequate to meet the community need presented.

The Commission’s *Delivering Justice* report^{xxviii} described the civil justice crisis facing the District before the pandemic. Now, Initiative grantees report that requests for help continue to increase, with vulnerable populations like District elders, those living with disabilities, and the immigrant population particularly susceptible to legal risk. Even cases that have not grown in number have become more complex and demand greater capacity to service them. Our post-pandemic world has created a new ‘normal’ whereby legal services providers are serving clients simultaneously in both remote and in-person environments, which requires increased staff and other resources.

Here are some snapshots of needs identified by Initiative grantees:

- *The need for representation in our courts and tribunals is great.* The most recently available data shows that rates of litigants in civil proceedings appearing in court without a lawyer are as high as 75-97% in D.C. Courts and at the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings.^{xxix}
- *Eviction remains at crisis level.* Eviction case filings in 2023 seem certain to exceed the year prior; the average monthly rate of filings has on average risen by a third from 2022 to 2023.
 - According to U.S. Census data, 26,000 of those D.C. adults in rental housing surveyed reported being behind in rent and 11,000 reported it was “very” or “somewhat” likely that they’ll have to leave their house within 2 months due to eviction – the vast majority of whom are District residents of color.^{xxx} This comes as the initial funding for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) was fully depleted halfway through FY23 and FY24 funding application periods have closed within days due to reaching capacity.^{xxxi}
 - According to the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, nearly two-thirds of extremely low-income D.C. families pay half or more of their limited cash income towards rent.^{xxxii} An increasing number of District residents, more than 44,000 in 2022, are “severely housing cost burdened,” meaning that they spent half their income on rent.^{xxxiii} Twelve percent of District residents (or 82,452) are experiencing housing insecurity, meaning housing unaffordability, inadequate housing, or frequent and unwanted moves – with that burden largely falling on families, children and youth; Black and Hispanic residents, and Ward 7 and 8 residents.^{xxxiv}
 - In its 2023 publication of the annual *Out of Reach* report, the National Low Income Housing Coalition ranked the District of Columbia as the sixth most expensive jurisdiction in the nation regarding rental housing wages, with the fair market rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in D.C. at \$1,838, and monthly income necessary to afford this rent without experiencing rental cost burden at \$6,126.^{xxxv} In contrast, the median household income among CLCPP clients served is \$1,200 per month, with the median monthly income among all clients served since 2019 at \$1,054.^{xxxvi}

- Across Wards 7 and 8, 78% of low-income residents are paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs. Half of these residents have delinquent debt, with only 42% having at least \$2,000 in emergency savings.^{xxxvii}
- Funded organizations have seen a 50% increase in calls for assistance; there have been over 2,000 calls to the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network in 2023.
- *Domestic violence remains a chronic, growing area of need.*
 - One in four women in the District have experienced domestic violence, and cases have continued to rise in 2023, not letting up on the surge providers saw during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as households faced increased economic strain and stay-at-home orders.
 - One domestic violence provider handled 40-50% more clients in 2023 than the same period in 2022. The average monthly rate of domestic violence filings was up 65% at the beginning of 2023 compared with 2022.
 - D.C. SAFE experienced 42,480 calls to their Crisis Response Line – the source of a majority of Initiative grantee referrals for Civil Protection Orders – in fiscal year 2023.^{xxxviii}
 - One organization is on track to co-counsel with 450+ volunteer attorneys (for an equivalent of over 35,000 donated hours of legal services) to better meet client needs.
- *Economic stressors persist.*
 - Some providers reported a 10% increase in requests for consumer debt legal help over the previous year. In Wards 7 and 8, 50% of people have some form of delinquent debt.^{xxxix}
 - Consumer defaults are at their highest levels since the 2009 economic depression.^{xl}
 - More than 100 foreclosures were filed in the District in June 2023 alone, with the District placing between the 9th and 10th states with the highest rates of foreclosure in the country.^{xli}
- *Family conflict often requires legal intervention.*
 - Providers report a range of 50-100% more calls for help in 2023 as compared to 2022.
 - In D.C.'s Family Court, 83-93% of litigants lack counsel.
 - The Initiative-funded Family Law Assistance Network has fielded close to 3,000 calls from D.C. residents seeking this type of assistance since its inception in March 2020, with a 38% increase thus far this year. The FLAN hotline receives an average of 25-40 calls per day.
- *Probate-related needs continue.*
 - A report issued jointly by the Council for Court Excellence and the D.C. Access to Justice Commission calls on the legal and philanthropic community to expand support for legal services in probate and estate administration among other reforms.^{xlii}

- One organization’s “Legal Information Help Line” received 1,619 calls regarding probate or life-planning issues over a two-year period. In 2022, 4 of every 10 resources accessed on LawHelp.org/DC were related to probate.
- *District residents require help navigating critical government programs and benefits.*
 - More clients with disabilities are seeking help with supported decision making and recovering stolen benefits.
 - With Medicaid recertification and Medicaid-funded services under renewed scrutiny, District residents with health needs require help addressing errors and litigating factual disputes on the necessity of services. Litigants appealing public benefits decisions at the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings are unrepresented 86% of the time.

These are just a few reasons that Initiative grantees report an increasing and more complex level of community need for civil legal help.

ⁱ To learn more about the Commission and our work, see www.dcccesstojustice.org. Commissioner Karen Newton Cole, Executive Director of Neighborhood Legal Services Program, recused herself from consideration of this testimony due to LSC restrictions.

ⁱⁱ Erica Williams, [DC’s Extreme Wealth Concentration Exacerbates Racial Inequality, Limits Economic Opportunity](#), DC Fiscal Policy Institute (October 20, 2022).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ward 8 (19%); Ward 7 (18%); Ward 6 (7%); Ward 5 (12%); Ward 4 (13%); Ward 3 (3%); Ward 2 (6%); Ward 1 (13%); and Unknown (9%). Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.

^{iv} See NPC Research, [Annual Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program Evaluation Report \(February 2024\)](#). Another good exploration of these efforts is available at Annemarie Cuccia, [We’re Trying to Make it a Level Playing Field: How a New Hotline Helped Stop Two-Thirds of Evictions in D.C.](#), The D.C. Line (August 22, 2022, updated December 9, 2022).

^v *Id.*

^{vi} *Id.*

^{vii} Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.

^{viii} In FY22, 29% of those served through the *Access to Justice Grants program* (or 11,731 of 40,836) (including those served by the Bank) and 14% of those served excluding the Bank (or 4,641 of 33,746) were low-income District residents with limited or no English proficiency. In the first half of FY23, that percentage was 30% (or 5,823 of 19,543) (including those served by the Bank) and 16% of those served excluding the Bank (or 2,633 of 16,353). Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.

^{ix} Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.

^x Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.

^{xi} Examples include NPC Research, [D.C. Bar Foundation’s Family Law Learning Network: Summary Report](#) (October 2022) and NPC Research, [D.C. Bar Foundation’s Family Law Learning Network: Litigant Perspectives on Remote Hearings in Family Law Cases](#) (December 2021).

-
- xii Each year, the D.C. Courts, in partnership with the Commission and the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, recognize pro bono attorneys who provide 50 or 100 plus hours of pro bono service to help those who cannot afford counsel. <https://www.dccourts.gov/about/pro-bono-honor-roll> <https://www.dccourts.gov/about/pro-bono-honor-roll>
- xiii The campaign establishes revenue-based benchmarks for law firm donations to legal services organizations. <https://dcaccesstojustice.org/raising-the-bar/>
- xiv United Planning Organization, [*D.C. is Not Making Progress on Affordable Housing for Those Who Need it Most*](#) (September 2023).
- xv Claudia D. Solari, Lydia Lo, Alavi Rashid, Lynden Bond, Urban Institute, [*Housing Insecurity in the District of Columbia*](#) (November 16, 2023).
- xvi *Supra* note iii.
- xvii *Id.*
- xviii See [*NPC Research, Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program \(CLCPP\) Annual Evaluation Report, FY2021 \(October 2021\)*](#); [*NPC Research, Biannual Progress Report to the Council of the District of Columbia and the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program \(CLCPP\) \(October 2022\)*](#); [*NPC Research, Biannual Progress Report to the Council of the District of Columbia and the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program \(CLCPP\) \(October 2023\)*](#); [*NPC Research, Annual Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program Evaluation Report \(February 2024\)*](#). See also Annemarie Cuccia, [*“We’re Trying to Make it a Level Playing Field: How a New Hotline Helped Stop Two-Thirds of Evictions in D.C.,” The D.C. Line \(August 22, 2022, updated December 9, 2022\)*](#).
- xix Information provided by the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center.
- xx *Supra* note iv.
- xxi *Id.*
- xxii *Id.*
- xxiii [*D.C. Access to Justice Commission, Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia \(December 2019\) at 204*](#). A summary of representation rates in D.C. Courts and the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings is available at https://dcaccesstojustice.org/reports_extra.html.
- xxiv Prescott, J., Starr, S., [*Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical Study*](#), Harvard Law Review, 133, No. 8 (2020) at 2460-2555.
- xxv *Supra* note xxiii at 204.
- xxvi *Id.* at 210.
- xxvii *Id.*
- xxviii *Id.*
- xxix *Id.*
- xxx U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (Week 63: October 1-30), [*Table 1b: Last Month’s Payment Status for Renter Occupied Housing Units, available at https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/hhp/hhp63.html*](#).
- xxxi See Annemarie Cuccia, [*Overwhelmed By People Seeking Help, D.C. Cuts Off Rental Assistance After 10 Days*](#), WAMU/DCist (October 18, 2023); Annemarie Cuccia, [*After Months Long Fight between Mayor and Council, Emergency Rental Assistance Gets More Funding*](#), WAMU/DCist (January 22, 2024).
- xxxii D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, [*D.C. Affordable Housing Toolbox*](#) (April 2019).
- xxxiii *Supra* note xiv.
- xxxiv *Supra* note xv.
- xxxv *Supra* note iv.
- xxxvi *Id.*
- xxxvii Miranda Santillo, Mingli Zhong, Oriya Cohen, Urban Institute, [*Washington, D.C., Has Glaring Financial Health Inequities. So Do Most American Cities*](#) (October 6, 2022).
- xxxviii D.C. Safe, [*D.C. Safe FY23 By the Numbers*](#).
- xxxix *Supra* note xxxvii.
- xl See, e.g., Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Liberty Street Economics, [*Credit Card Delinquency Continues to Rise*](#) (November 7, 2023).
- xli <https://www.sofi.com/learn/content/foreclosure-rates-for-50-states/>
- xlii [*Council for Court Excellence and D.C. Access to Justice Commission, Strengthening Probate Administration in the District of Columbia \(February 2022\)*](#).

BUDGET TESTIMONY HIGHLIGHTS

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Budget Oversight Hearings: What We Heard

More than 50 witnesses testified at the D.C. Council on April 25, 2024 about how drastic cuts to the Access to Justice Initiative will undermine the safety, health, housing, and economic stability of District residents.

Dozens more expressed support for Initiative funding. Key points from oral and written testimony are below. We urge the D.C. Council to restore FY24 funding of \$31.7M to ensure these services continue.

What Clients Said ...

“The victimization I experienced bled over to my family, friends, and neighbors.... Let me assure you, the threats to the victim can quickly become problems to the community.... Without the legal aid and literal hand-holding, I’m not sure where I’d be today.” C.N., DCVLP Client

“I’m asking this Committee - will you keep me safe? Will you protect my life? Or will you take away the funding that has helped this - my life- become possible?”

T.M., Georgetown HJA Cancer Law Project client who required legal help to stabilize housing before she could receive a lifesaving surgery and medical device

What This Funding Cut Will Mean:

- **Thousands fewer clients will be served** across the entire spectrum of vital legal needs, meaning:
 - Instability for families and children without help in custody, child support, legal support for kinship care arrangements, and other legal help that keep families together
 - A provider having to turn away 1 in 3 domestic violence survivors seeking life-saving services
 - Hundreds of District households uprooted by eviction
 - The potential loss of the District’s only dedicated workers’ right clinic
 - Less support for returning citizens seeking employment and stability
 - Less or no support for elderly residents and residents with disabilities who want to live in the community
- Gutting of the Community Legal Interpreter Bank, leaving non-English speakers isolated and at risk
- **Significant loss of dedicated, experienced staff**, potentially 1/3 to 1/2 of legal staff at some organizations
- **Some funded projects and organizations could cease to exist entirely.**

Need is Growing:

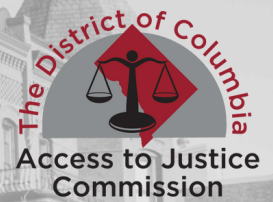
- The Initiative’s largest grantee is on track to accept 49% more cases in 2024 than in 2023 while still having to turn clients away
- Domestic violence needs are growing. One provider handled 1,200 consults in 2023, double the number the previous year
- The Family Law Assistance Network has received over 3,100 eligible referrals since 2020, with a 55% increase in volume in 2023
- Evictions are on the rise, with double the number scheduled so far in 2024 as in the same period of 2023
- The need for services to assist recently arrived migrants and combat fraud against immigrants, and for District residents facing debt and consumer fraud, is outpacing provider capacity

What the Initiative Means to the Community:

- A **collaborative, robust legal community** that supports the courts, District agencies, non-legal services providers and their clients
- **More than 5,000 low-income residents have remained housed** since June 2020 because of Initiative eviction-related services
- **More youth in school and engaged in their education** due to receiving necessary supports
- **District families receiving millions of dollars** in benefits, tax credits, and protecting assets from debt and fraud, including \$14M saved by the District in Medicaid costs by keeping children out of hospitals and emergency rooms
- **Dignity and autonomy** for low-income District residents aging in place, remaining in their communities, and managing end-of-life planning

IMPACT OF PROPOSED BUDGET CUT

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



The Mayor's proposed FY25 budget reduces the Access to Justice Initiative by 67% to \$10.457 million. This will have catastrophic consequences for the District's legal services providers and the almost 40,000 District residents who receive life-changing civil legal services through the program each year. It will also erase significant progress made in the past three fiscal years to address chronic justice gaps in high-need areas. We urge the D.C. Council to restore FY24 funding of \$31.7M to ensure services continue.

Potential consequences of the proposed 67% cut in funding:

Increased Housing Instability

- A potential **loss of over \$10.8 million** dedicated to keeping District residents in their homes through eviction defense and prevention, foreclosure prevention, addressing unsafe housing conditions, and affordable housing preservation.
- Funding cuts would mean dramatically less outreach to tenants (6,858 door knocks and 5,609 outreach letters in FY23) - and **more District residents losing their homes**

Other Devastating Cuts

A 67% cut spread equally across currently funded projects would mean:

- Almost \$900,000 less for legal services for consumer issues, debt defense, predatory lending and fraud
- Almost \$500,000 less to support re-entering citizens
- Almost \$700,000 less for domestic violence legal services and almost \$1.5 million less for family law legal services
- \$700,000 less for immigration legal services
- Around \$600,000 less for probate and estate planning services to ensure the intergenerational transfer of wealth
- Almost \$900,000 less for public benefits matters and over \$900,000 for health and disability matters, which ensure financial stability and health care services for District residents
- Almost \$275,000 less for special education matters, at a time of skyrocketing student need

Critical loss of staffing

The proposed budget cut would force **deep staffing cuts which will greatly reduce the number of District residents helped.**

Cuts could mean:

- **The loss of 161 FTEs** - the equivalent of 67% of those currently funded through the Initiative
- The loss of 2/3 of staffing for the Community Legal Interpreter Bank (from 3 FTEs to 1) at a time when the Interpreter Bank is turning down requests due to underfunding
- Loss of non-legal support staff including social workers and outreach staff
- Many funded providers rely on Initiative funding for 30-50% of their total staffing organization-wide; over half of projects (35 projects across 12 providers) rely on the Initiative for 75% or more of their funding

Expanded Projects in Jeopardy

- Gutting recent expansions in the availability of future planning and probate legal services by four providers - despite longstanding unmet needs in this area in the community
- Dramatically shrinking family law services that offer stability and financial security for District families and children
- Jeopardizing expanded community partnerships and outreach, and **300+ fewer trainings** for community members
- Reductions in the number of remote and in-person legal clinics

To learn more: visit us at <https://dcaccesstojustice.org/access-public-funding/> or go to <https://www.dcbafoundation.org/>

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



Restore Funding of \$31.7M to the Access to Justice Initiative to protect community partnerships

Initiative-funded civil legal services projects served nearly 40,000 District residents in 2023 and further their reach through countless collaborations, trainings, workshops, consultations, and partnerships with other grantees and more than 200 community partners: legal organizations and firms, District agencies, services providers, unions, and coalitions in the health, education, employment, housing social services, faith, public health and safety, and other spheres.

District Agencies

Child and Family Services Agency
D.C. Public Library
Department of Aging & Community Living
Department of Behavioral Health
Department of Buildings
Department of Energy & Environment
Department of Health
Department of Human Services
Department of Insurance, Securities & Banking
Department of Parks & Recreation
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services
Department of Health Care Finance
Mayor's Office of Latino Affairs
Mayor's Interfaith Council
Mayor's Office of Fathers, Men, and Boys
Mayor's Office on African American Affairs
Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs
Metropolitan Police Department
Office of Neighborhood Safety & Engagement
Office of the Attorney General
Office of Paid Family Leave
Office of the Student Advocate
Office of the Tenant Advocate

Education

District of Columbia Public Schools
Briya PCS
Carlos Rosario International PCS
CentroNia
Community College Preparatory Academy PCS
Rocketship Public Schools
UDC Community College
Georgetown University Law Center
George Washington University Law School
Howard University School of Law*
American University Law School
UDC David A. Clarke School of Law
Every Student Every Day Coalition

Health

AmeriHealth Caritas
Bread for the City*
Children's National Hospital
GWU Hospital Cancer Center
GW Medical Faculty Associates
Healthy Home Pediatrics
Home Care Partners
La Clínica del Pueblo
Mamatoto Village
Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care
Medical Society of DC
Medstar Health
Planned Parenthood DC
Unity Health Care
Washington Health Institute
Wendt Center for Loss and Healing
Whitman Walker Health*

Housing

D.C. Housing Authority
Community of Hope
District Alliance for Safe Housing
Housing Counseling Services
Latin American Youth Center
Interagency Council on Homelessness
Pathways to Housing
Sinai House
United Planning Organization

Safe, Stable Communities

A Wider Circle
AsylumWorks
Bellevue Shares Family Success Center
Beloved Community Incubator
Benning Road Family Strengthening Collaborative
bird SEED Foundation
Building Bridges Across the River
Capital Area Asset Builders
Community Family Life Services
Courtney's House
DC Central Kitchen
DC Jobs with Justice*
Empower DC*
Greater Washington Urban League
Hill East Civic Association
Latino Economic Development Center
LIFT
Martha's Table

To learn more visit us at dcaccesstojustice.org or go to dcbfoundation.org

**denotes organization that receives Initiative funding for legal work*

IMPACT ON HOUSING

ACCESSING JUSTICE

in D.C.



The Access to Justice Initiative Promotes Housing Stability

The Mayor's proposed FY25 budget reduces the Access to Justice Initiative by 67% to \$10.457 million. 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. We urge the D.C. Council to restore FY24 funding of \$31.7M to ensure these services continue.

How the Initiative Helps D.C. Tenants

A Growing Housing Crisis in DC

- DC ranks among the most expensive rental markets nationally; more than 1/3 of tenant households have a high housing cost burden
- The soaring need for affordable housing stands in stark contrast to available supply: 40,000 people were on the waitlist for housing vouchers in FY23. In FY24, the median time from application to lease in Public Housing was 11 years
- Scheduled evictions increased 250% between January 2022 and January 2023, and rates in 2024 are double for the same period in 2023
- Tenant requests for legal help with housing matters increased 225% between January 2022 and January 2023, and providers reported additional increases of 19-45% through 2023
- The monthly average of eviction filings in DC Superior Court grew by 42% in 2023.



Expanded Funding = Real Results

- Since September 2021, Initiative-funded canvassers have contacted tenants with a scheduled eviction to connect with legal, social services
- For tenants served in FY23:
 - **87% of tenants** who wanted to stay in their unit were able to do so
 - **Only 5%** of cases resulted in an eviction judgment against a tenant
 - **89%** of those facing voucher termination had a **favorable result**
- **8,200+ DC residents** got help between August 2019 - September 2023
- [Read FY24 eviction project report](#) →



Did you know?

- **More than 1/2 of Initiative funds** help keep District residents in their homes through eviction defense and diversion, foreclosure prevention, and affordable housing preservation
- **The Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network**, a coordinated phone and online intake system, streamlines legal services access by providing tenants with an efficient, centralized service to connect them to one of 6 legal aid providers. **10,300+ District residents have contacted this line since it was created in June 2020.**



Initiative's Eviction Diversion Model Fosters Community Solutions

FY22, FY23, & FY24 funding enabled legal services providers to partner with community-based organizations and canvassers for intensive outreach to identify, support, & train community members and leaders, including in FY23:

6,858 doors knocks
5,609 outreach letters
664 "Know Your Rights" Trainings with 12,105 attendees

To learn more

visit us at dcaccesstojustice.org
or go to <https://www.dcbfoundation.org>



IMPACT ON PUBLIC SAFETY

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



The Access to Justice Initiative Promotes Public Safety

The Mayor's proposed FY25 budget reduces the Access to Justice Initiative by 67% to \$10.457 million. This will have catastrophic consequences for economic security and opportunity for almost 40,000 District residents who receive life-changing civil legal services through the program each year. We urge the D.C. Council to restore funding to the FY24 level of \$31.7M to ensure these services continue.

Highlights of Initiative work in promoting public safety include:

Promoting Stable, Resilient Communities

- **Increasing education opportunities for youth** by ensuring students have access to special education and related services, language access, and other required supports to keep them invested in their education. Other legal services specifically target court-involved youth or youth at risk of court involvement.
- **Achieving family stability** through legal services to prevent children from entering the foster care system by supporting families at risk and legal supports to relatives seeking to care for children whose parents are unable; and legal services to reduce family conflict and resolve custody and child support disputes.
- **Helping Seniors aging in place** through legal services to maintain housing, protect in-home support services, and assist with financial planning to ensure inter-generational transfer of homes and property
- **Protecting the District's growing immigrant population** from fraud and provide culturally specific legal services that focus on the safety, security, and holistic well-being of migrant and immigrant communities
- **Promoting economic opportunity** and stability for District residents, including those with disabilities, experiencing medical crises, re-entering citizens, low-wage workers, and others at risk of financial or commercial exploitation

Keeping Abuse Survivors Safe

- Trauma-informed services to survivors of domestic and gender based violence in all 8 wards, including emergency legal services, crisis safety planning, and expanded walk-in clinics and virtual clinics at the courthouse and in the community
- For one organization, 1,200 free legal consultations in 2023 for low-income victims of domestic violence, immigrants, and at-risk children - - double the number provided in 2022.
- Holistic legal support for crime victims and survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation, and training community providers on identifying trafficking survivors - with one provider receiving 445 calls from crime victims seeking services in FY23

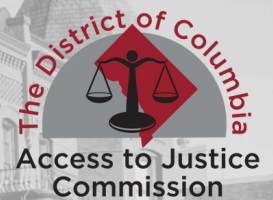
Decreasing recidivism

- Ensuring individuals transitioning back to the community after being detained in local or Federal juvenile, residential, or adult facilities have necessary legal supports for education, custody, child support, employment and consumer matters and other post-incarceration issues so that they can successfully reintegrate into their communities.
- One funded provider working with adolescents has cut recidivism in half through legal advocacy for well-tailored reentry plans and community supports.

To learn more: visit us at <https://dcaccesstojustice.org/access-public-funding/> or go to <https://www.dcbafoundation.org/>

IMPACT ON ECONOMIC SECURITY

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



The Access to Justice Initiative Promotes Economic Security

The Mayor's proposed FY25 budget reduces the Access to Justice Initiative by 67% to \$10.457 million. This will have catastrophic consequences for economic security and opportunity for almost 40,000 District residents who receive life-changing civil legal services through the program each year. We urge the D.C. Council to restore FY24 funding of \$31.7M to ensure these services continue.

Highlights of Initiative work in promoting economic security include:

Protecting residents from fraud and illegal debt collection

- Fighting predatory lending and debt collection schemes, including fraud perpetrated against people with disabilities and undocumented immigrants
- Averting negative court judgments and adverse credit reporting that would limit future housing and employment opportunities
- The DC Debt Collection Hotline has served thousands of residents, and the number is provided by the D.C. Superior Court to all litigants facing debt collection lawsuits.
- One grantee program alone kept \$1.4 million in the pockets of 767 families facing debt and consumer cases last year.

Protecting wages and jobs

- Ensuring District residents know their rights and receive the wages and benefits they have earned and fighting to recover stolen wages
- Fighting employment-related discrimination and harassment so that residents can stay employed
- Providing specialized services for working mothers, immigrants, trafficking survivors, returning citizens, and other vulnerable populations at higher risk of unemployment and economic exploitation

Maintaining stable income and benefits:

- Helping District residents navigate vital public benefits matters (unemployment insurance, paid family leave, TANF, SNAP, rental subsidies, shelter services, and health benefits) - often without litigation
- Representing people with disabilities and domestic violence survivors to protect their benefits from being mismanaged or stolen

Preserving intergenerational transfer of homes and assets

- Heirs property and other probate-related work to help families transfer assets, especially homes - allowing families to stay in multigenerational in the District, and promoting Black homeownership.
- Assisting District low- and moderate-income residents and seniors with financial and future planning

Reducing healthcare costs

- Addressing health-harming problems through legal solutions - one grantee addressing housing code violations found community savings of over \$14 million in Medicaid costs avoided over three years by keeping children out of hospitals and emergency rooms.

To learn more: visit us at

<https://dcaccesstojustice.org/access-public-funding/> or go to <https://www.dcbafoundation.org/>

LEVERAGING RESOURCES

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Restore \$31.7M in Funding for Access to Justice

The Mayor's proposed FY25 budget reduces the Access to Justice Initiative by 67% to \$10.457 million. Robust public funding allows legal services organizations to leverage every public dollar of funding into additional pro bono services, private financial support, and community knowledge-building. These cuts put the safety, health, housing, and economic stability of the District's most vulnerable populations at risk. We urge the D.C. Council to restore FY24 funding of \$31.7M to ensure these services continue.

How the Access to Justice Initiative Leverages Other Resources

Supporting Pro Bono Service

Legal service providers magnify the impact of every public dollar through the recruitment, training, and support of private lawyers and law firms in the District. For FY23, Initiative funding supported:

- **926 cases placed with pro bono attorneys**
449 cases co-counseled with pro bono attorneys

Grantees report the equivalency of at least **\$50.5 million in donated legal services**. These pro bono services are only made possible when there is a stably-funded legal services network to identify cases, develop resources, and provide ongoing training and mentorship.

Educating and Empowering Residents

For FY23, Initiative funding supported:

- **1,134 “Know Your Rights” Trainings** delivered to renters, caregivers, caseworkers, recently arrived migrants, youth, law enforcement, reentering citizens, and other District residents
- **12,105 community attendees** to eviction prevention “Know Your Rights” trainings
- District residents got information at community events and partners, including food distributions, public libraries, schools, and medical providers
- One grantee alone held 78 community events, **reaching over 15,000 District community members** in 2023

Additional Private Financial Support

- Private support has been **greatly incentivized** by the District's leadership in establishing and funding the Access to Justice Initiative, signaling its vital importance to the community. The District's legal services providers work aggressively to raise money from many other sources.
- The Commission recognizes law firms that provide a qualifying level of financial support to local legal services providers through its [Raising the Bar in D.C. campaign](#). Between 2011 and 2022, participating law firms donated over **\$56 million**. While this number does not capture all law firm giving, or individual giving, private giving simply cannot make up the proposed funding cut.

Without the District's leadership in appropriating these public funds and the stable legal services infrastructure they assure, these important private resources might go untapped, and thousands more clients denied access to legal help.

To learn more visit us at dcaccesstojustice.org or go to dcbfoundation.org

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services: Promoting Community Stability in Ward 1

- More than 5,200 Ward 1 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in 2023 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 12% and child poverty rate of 23%, more than 1 in 10 Ward 1 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence and economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help.
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps



Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC. In Ward 1, 32% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative funded programs prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions.

Source: DC Kids Count



Economic Security

Income disparities in Ward 1 point to uneven financial security: the median household income for Black families in Ward 1 is less than one-third of that for White families. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Kids Count



Families and Youth

More than 12,400 children live in Ward 1. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, immigration matters, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning, to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 1



Did You Know it Funds?

- **Medical-legal partnerships** with Ward 1-based medical clinics that accept legal referrals for family law, public benefits, and a range of other issues
- A weekly **immigration and domestic violence legal clinic** at two Ward-1 sites
- Legal intakes and a quarterly **immigration clinic** held at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School
- Monthly **financial workshops**, and outreach at local food distributions
- **Partnerships** with Ward-1 located community organizations
- 351 Ward 1 tenants alone were assisted with **eviction matters** in one year's time

To learn more: visit us at <https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to <https://www.dcbafoundation.org/>



ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 2

- More than 2,300 Ward 2 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in FY23 - and community need continues to grow.
- Low-income Ward 2 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help.
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities citywide.

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps

Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC, including in Ward 2, where 33% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

Economic Security

Ward 2 includes some of DC's most economically stable neighborhoods, but sharp disparities exist: the median household income for Black families in Ward 2 is less than one-quarter of that for White families, and 4.8% of families in Ward 2 live below the poverty line. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters

Family Stability


More than 8,700 children live in Ward 2. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 2

Did You Know it Funds?

- **Legal and wraparound services** in Shaw, including, including housing search help, social work support, medical care, and free food and clothing
- Free weekly legal clinic for **domestic violence survivors and immigration matters** at a Ward-2 medical clinic
- **Trainings and presentations** at health clinics, law firms, MLK Library, and community locations
- Criminal record sealing workshops
- Support for **low-income Asian American communities** in downtown DC to secure tenant rights and preserve affordable housing
- A number of grantees have their **primary office spaces** in Ward 2
- 108 Ward 2 tenants alone were assisted with **eviction matters** in one year's time

To learn more: visit us at
<https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to
<https://www.dcbafoundation.org/> 

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 3

- More than 1,100 Ward 3 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects - and community need continues to grow.
- Low-income Ward 3 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities citywide.

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps

Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC, including in Ward 3, where 31% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

Financial Security

Ward 3 includes some of DC's wealthiest neighborhoods, but sharp disparities exist: the median household income for Black families in Ward 3 is less than one-half of that for White families, and 8% of Ward 3 residents live in poverty. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters, DC Kids Count

Family Stability

More than 13,200 children live in Ward 3. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 3

Did You Know it Funds?

- Initiative funded providers serve residents in all 8 wards, including Ward 3.
- One Initiative grantee with a home office in Ward 3 provides legal services for DC residents with low incomes dealing with the often devastating consequences of abusive debt collection practices and other consumer related issues.
- Initiative grantees partner with UDC David A. Clarke School of Law, American University Washington College of Law, and other community service providers to provide trainings and support for Ward 3 service professionals and clients.
- Last year, Initiative grantees provided legal assistance to **148 tenants faced with eviction in Ward 3**

To learn more: visit us at
<https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to
<https://www.dcbfoundation.org/>



ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 4

- More than 5,000 Ward 4 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in FY23 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 9% nearly 1 in 10 Ward 4 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help.
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps

Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC. In Ward 4, 32% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

Financial Security

With a 6% unemployment rate and a 9% poverty rate, many Ward 4 residents struggle to pay bills and meet their families' needs. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters, DC Kids Count

Family Stability

More than 18,700 children live in Ward 4. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 4

Did You Know it Funds?

- One Initiative grantee helps **preserve affordable housing** in Ward 4, working with tenants to fight illegal rent increases, demand repairs for housing code violations, and challenge unfair landlord practices
- One Ward 4-based Initiative grantee provides **legal assistance to crime victims, including sexual assault and domestic violence survivors**, along with holistic advocacy and case management
- One grantee provides a quarterly financial workshop at the Petworth Neighborhood Library, and does monthly outreach at a food distribution site
- In one year's time, Initiative grantees provided legal assistance to **278 tenants threatened with eviction** in Ward 4

To learn more: visit us at
<https://dcaccesstojustice.org/> or go to
<https://www.dcbfoundation.org/>



ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 5

- More than 4,700 Ward 5 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in 2023 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 16%, many Ward 5 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps

Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC. In Ward 5, 38% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

Financial Security

With a 5.9% unemployment rate and a 16% poverty rate, many Ward 5 residents struggle to pay bills and meet their families' needs. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters, DC Kids Count

Family Stability

More than 17,400 children live in Ward 5. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 5

Did You Know it Funds?

- A **free monthly walk-in clinic** at Woodridge Library that provides legal help with public benefits, unemployment, student loans, and more
- Legal information, advice, and brief assistance from a **Ward 5-based** legal services provider on a range of legal issues
- **Twice-monthly legal clinics** in Spanish and English at a resource center for families experiencing homelessness and poverty
- **Legal orientation clinics** for recently arrived migrants
- **Medical-legal partnerships** at Children's National Hospital, focused on adolescents, and at Washington Hospital Center, focused on maternal health.
- In one year's time, Initiative grantees provided legal assistance to 466 **tenants facing eviction** in Ward 5

To learn more: visit us at <https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to <https://www.dcbfoundation.org/>

ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 6

- More than 2,700 Ward 6 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in FY23 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 11%, many Ward 6 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like more stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports stable, thriving communities.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps

Safe, Affordable Housing

Gentrification has pushed up rents and displaced longtime residents across DC. In Ward 6, 32% of households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count

Financial Security

Income disparities in Ward 6 point to uneven financial security: the median household income for Black families in Ward 6 is less than half of that for White families, and 7.1% of Ward 6 families live below the poverty line. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters

Family Stability

More than 17,200 children live in Ward 6. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 6

Did You Know it Funds?

- On-site legal assistance at D.C. Superior Court in Ward 6, including the Child Support Resource Center, which offers **same-day representation and legal advice for low-income litigants in parentage and child support matters** and the Domestic Violence Intake Center, where Initiative-funded lawyers offer **representation to domestic violence survivors seeking protection orders** against their abusers, and the **Landlord Tenant Resource Center**.
- Twice monthly legal aid clinics at a emergency shelter
- One Ward 6-based Initiative grantee provides **legal assistance to people with disabilities**, such as ensuring they have equal access to public accommodations
- In FY23, Initiative grantees provided **legal assistance to 268 tenants facing eviction** in Ward 6

To learn more: visit us at <https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to <https://www.dcbfoundation.org/>



ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 7

- Nearly 6,700 Ward 7 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in FY23 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 24%, many Ward 7 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help.
- Having legal representation leads to better case outcomes like stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports stable, thriving communities.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps



Safe, Affordable Housing

As gentrification has lowered Black homeownership rates east of the river and pushed up rents, 43% of Ward 7 households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count



Financial Security

With a 16.5 % unemployment rate and a median household income less than half of that for all of DC, many Ward 7 residents struggle to pay bills and meet their families' needs. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters



Family Stability

More than 19,700 children live in Ward 7 and the child poverty rate is 34%. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Kids Count

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 7



Did You Know it Funds?

- An Initiative grantee is a **medical-legal partnership** with Unity Health Care in Ward 7, offering legal assistance to parents of children whose medical issues are related to poor housing conditions
- Community legal education workshops focused on **estate planning and probate matters** were held by one Initiative grantee at the DC Dream Center in 2022 and 2023
- A free monthly walk-in clinic at Benning Neighborhood Library offered by one Initiative grantee provides **legal help with public benefits, unemployment, student loans, and more**
- Free monthly trainings on **family law, housing, and public benefits** at Capital View Library
- In FY23, Initiative grantees provided **legal assistance to 560 tenants threatened with eviction** in Ward 7

To learn more: visit us at

<https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to
<https://www.dcbafoundation.org/>



ACCESSING JUSTICE in D.C.



Civil Legal Services : Promoting Community Stability in Ward 8

- More than 7,300 Ward 8 residents were served through Access to Justice Initiative-funded civil legal services projects in FY23 - and community need continues to grow.
- With a poverty rate of 28%, many Ward 8 residents who experience civil legal problems - housing instability, family issues, domestic violence or economic insecurity - cannot afford legal help.
- Having legal representation leads to better outcomes like more stable families, secure incomes, and livable housing, and supports safe, thriving communities.

Source: DC Kids Count

How the Access to Justice Initiative Helps



Safe, Affordable Housing

As gentrification has lowered Black homeownership rates east of the river and pushed up rents, 49% of Ward 8 households report a high housing cost burden. Initiative grantees prevent foreclosures, help preserve affordable housing, maintain safe housing conditions, and use an intensive, in-person outreach model to stop evictions citywide.

Source: DC Kids Count



Financial Security

With a 9.6% unemployment rate and a median household income less than half of that for all of DC, many Ward 8 residents struggle to pay bills and meet their families' needs. Initiative grantees help residents secure public benefits, fight illegal debt collection, and protect their rights in employment matters.

Source: DC Health Matters



Family Stability

More than 21,000 children live in Ward 8, with a child poverty rate of 36%. Initiative grantees assist District families with resolving custody disputes, securing child support, keeping students invested in their educations and supporting reentering youth, and undertaking long-term care and estate planning to help families manage unforeseen circumstances.

Source: DC Health Matters, DC Kids Count

Initiative-funded Legal Service Providers Work in Communities Throughout Ward 8



Did You Know it Funds?

- Provided **legal assistance to 982 tenants threatened with eviction** in Ward 8
- One grantee provided legal help with housing, public benefits, family law and more, as well as **wraparound services** at its Anacostia location, including social work support, medical care, and free food and clothing
- **Children's National Hospital** sites in Anacostia and at THE ARC host Initiative-funded lawyers.
- A criminal record sealing workshop with CSOSA
- Advanced Directive workshop **for seniors**
- Weekly walk-in legal clinic for **domestic violence survivors**
- Legal clinic at **Parkland Turner Library**
- Know-your-rights seminars for **caregivers and caseworkers** at community locations
- Financial literacy training for **young adults** at THEARC

To learn more: visit us at

<https://dcaccesstojustice.org> or go to

<https://www.dccbarfoundation.org/>





**Testimony of the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission
Regarding Mayor Bowser's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request**

ATTACHED STATEMENTS

1. **D.C. Courts** (*Joint Statement from Chief Judge Anna Blackburne-Rigsby and Chief Judge Anita Josey-Herring*)
2. **D.C. Bar** (*Signed by D.C. Bar President, President-Elect, and 34 Past Presidents*)
3. **Advocates for Justice and Education** (*Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas, Executive Director*)
4. **Amara Legal Center** (*Caroline Ackerman, Executive Director*)
5. **Ayuda** (*Paula Fitzgerald, Executive Director*)
6. **Bread for the City**
7. **Children's Law Center**
8. **Christian Legal Aid of the District of Columbia** (*Whitney King, Executive Director*)
9. **DC Affordable Law Firm** (*Gabrielle Mulnick Majewski Executive Director*)
10. **D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center**
11. **D.C. KinCare Alliance** (*Marla Spindel, Executive Director*)
12. **DC Volunteer Lawyer's Project** (*Sara Tennen, Executive Director*)
13. **Georgetown University Health Justice Alliance**
14. **Howard University School of Law Fair Housing Clinic** (*Valerie Schneider, Professor of Law and Director, Clinical Law Center*)
15. **Legal Aid DC**
16. **Legal Counsel for the Elderly** (*Rhonda Cunningham Holmes, Executive Director*)
17. **Mother's Outreach Network**
18. **Neighborhood Legal Services Program** (*Karen A. Newton Cole, Executive Director*)
19. **Quality Trust** (*Sam Crane, Legal Director*)
20. **School Justice Project**
21. **Tzedek DC** (*Ariel Levinson-Waldman, Founding President and Director-Counsel*)
22. **Victim Legal Network of DC**
23. **Washington Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs** (*Ryan Downer, Legal Director*)
24. **Whitman Walker Health** (*Amy Nelson, Legal Director*)



District of Columbia Courts



**Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety**

**Written Statement of Hon. Anna Blackburne-Rigsby Chief Judge, D.C. Court of Appeals
and Hon. Anita Josey-Herring, Chief Judge, D.C. Superior Court**

In Support of the Access to Justice Initiative

The District of Columbia Courts are pleased to testify in support of the Access to Justice Initiative (“Initiative”) once again. The D.C. Courts are confronted every day by the significant civil justice gap that persists in our community. One significant obstacle to closing this gap is the vast number of litigants who must navigate their cases alone in both the D.C. Superior Court and the D.C. Court of Appeals because they cannot afford counsel. The Initiative is a fundamental and essential part of any effort to provide equal justice for District residents facing significant civil legal challenges because it is a critical tool in securing legal representation for the thousands of litigants who seek redress in our tribunals each year. The Initiative increases the opportunity for residents who are in legal crisis to have an advocate at their side when the things they most value – their children, their livelihood, their safety, their homes – are at risk. That is why it is critical to maintain consistent and adequate funding to support legal services providers that offer free legal help to low-income District residents experiencing these problems in civil cases.

As judges, we see first-hand how important legal services providers are to the administration of justice. The Court partners with local legal services organizations to host court-based projects that make free legal services more readily available to court users. The assistance provided involves a range of legal help such as legal information, advice, brief service, limited representation, or full representation, provided at the time the litigant is in court with an opportunity to secure longer-term representation. We and our colleagues are grateful to be able to direct court users with questions and legal needs to these valuable resources. Each year thousands of court litigants are served through these projects.

D.C. Courts Statement on the Access to Justice Initiative, page 2

Most importantly, the Initiative has provided a greater opportunity for court litigants to have the benefit of full, legal representation. The legal issues confronted by litigants are complex, and many struggle to understand the relevant statutes and rules, effectively raise complicated defenses, and present their evidence and arguments persuasively. For the high percentage of litigants who also struggle with other challenges like physical disabilities, low literacy, lack of internet and technology access, or histories of domestic violence or trauma, navigating the process without counsel can seem, and in practice be, impossible. For these litigants, counsel is indispensable.

We also recognize that a well-funded and stable legal services network helps advance our goal of expanding the level of other *pro bono* representation in our courts. Legal services providers ensure that the cases placed with volunteer lawyers are properly screened, and that these lawyers receive the training, mentoring, and support that they need to take on cases that may be outside their area of expertise. The Courts are pleased to recognize this community of *pro bono* lawyers each year through the *Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll*. Legal service providers are essential to harnessing this resource for the benefit of District residents.

Having access to counsel also advances the efficient operations of our courts. Legal counsel present cases more efficiently, thereby reducing litigant wait times and freeing up judicial resources. They ensure that dispositive issues are raised early in the case, reducing time expended by parties and witnesses while also permitting judges to reach a just result in a timely manner. They also assist their clients in settlement negotiations and mediation to potentially resolve matters without the need for lengthy court procedures. Efficiency is now more important to the courts than ever as we continue to reimagine operations with a combination of virtual and in-person hearings. Self-represented litigants remain in dire need of representation to navigate the legal system, as well as understand and affect their rights.

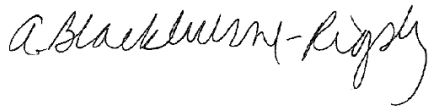
As court leaders, we are also charged with ensuring the fair administration of justice more generally. Public trust and confidence in the courts is essential in our democratic system. However, no matter how much the Courts do institutionally to enhance access to justice for unrepresented litigants, litigants feel they are treated more fairly when they have counsel by their side.

D.C. Courts Statement on the Access to Justice Initiative, page 3

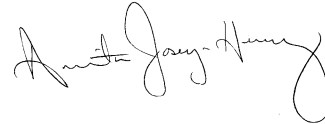
Legal services providers have long played an instrumental role in serving court litigants in partnership with the court. Their work during the pandemic is a good example. Legal services providers worked closely with the court to ensure access to justice even during the most acute phases of the crisis. Accessing the courts during this time presented new challenges for everyone, particularly litigants without counsel. The courts took numerous steps to ensure access to justice, including modifying operations to allow for remote access to court services and establishing six remote hearing sites throughout the District for litigants who otherwise lacked the ability to participate in virtual hearings. Legal services providers gave important feedback to court leadership on operational changes during this period, highlighting best practices for remote operations, and providing new resources to unrepresented litigants navigating the virtual court experience.

Important innovations that began during the pandemic continue to be offered to court litigants. The Court and the Bar provided remote access to court-based programs and resource centers in landlord-tenant, debt collection, small claims, child support, family law, and domestic violence cases, all areas that receive Initiative support. Legal services staff established centralized hotlines for unrepresented litigants seeking legal advice and representation in high-volume courtrooms. The courts also have partnered with legal services providers to share case information which enables attorneys to proactively reach out to litigants before hearings to offer access to civil legal services. These affirmative outreach efforts – the result of fairly recent funding – mean court litigants have access to legal support earlier in their cases.

The vision statement of the District of Columbia Courts is “Open to All, Trusted by All, Justice for All.” As judges, we are fully committed to achieving this vision. To do that, we rely on a skilled and adequately resourced legal services network to protect the rights of the District’s most vulnerable residents. The Access to Justice Initiative plays a significant role in providing that support. Thank you for the opportunity to submit our written testimony on behalf of the Access to Justice Initiative.



The Honorable Anna Blackburne-Rigsby
Chief Judge, D.C. Court of Appeals



The Honorable Anita Josey-Herring
Chief Judge, D.C. Superior Court

April 25, 2024



April 22, 2024

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

RE: FY25 Access to Justice Initiative Funding

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

On behalf of the District of Columbia Bar and its past Presidents, we write to express our ardent support for the Access to Justice Initiative (the "Initiative") and the D.C. Access to Justice Commission's call for restoration of program funding. We are grateful to the District government for its support of the Initiative and recognize that it is a model for the nation.

Given the transformative nature of the Initiative funding, we were alarmed to learn that the Mayor's proposed fiscal year 2025 budget reduces by 67% the \$31.668 million allocated for the Initiative in fiscal year 2024, leaving only \$10.457 million for this critical program. These funds provide essential legal assistance to low-income District residents. Drastic cuts to this effective program will lead to catastrophic consequences for District residents that will put their safety, health, housing, and economic stability at risk, placing the District's most vulnerable residents even further in jeopardy. **We urge the Council to prioritize the restoration of Initiative funding to the fiscal 2024 level of \$31.668 million.**

Reducing investment in the Initiative will be especially damaging when community need continues to increase. Even before the pandemic, there was a staggering demand for civil legal services, as detailed in the Commission's 2019 report "[*Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia*](#)." The Initiative proved critical to the District's pandemic response and recovery, with District legal services providers pursuing innovative approaches to address unmet demand for legal help. FY22 through FY24 budget increases positioned the District's legal services community to expand services to address unmet legal needs. This work is at serious risk if funding is drastically cut, to the detriment of District residents. Although the pandemic has waned, demand for legal services continues to grow, especially in the areas of housing and domestic violence.

Initiative grantees leverage this funding and its capacity to help District residents when they recruit our attorney members to do pro bono work. The D.C. Bar is the largest mandatory bar in the country, with more than 118,000 members nationwide and 66,000 members in the D.C. metropolitan area. Meaningful access to justice for every D.C. resident is one of the Bar's

core values and providing pro bono services is both an ethical obligation under our Rules of Professional Responsibility as well as a moral commitment for many members.

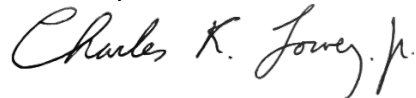
As Bar leaders, we continually encourage our D.C. Bar members to devote more time to pro bono work through volunteering with legal services organizations. But pro bono attorneys rely on the work of legal services providers in building trusting relationships with communities, screening cases, providing training, and offering mentorship, all of which take significant resources. Any cuts to funding for the Initiative's legal services grantees put at risk the multiplier effect of their capacity to support pro bono volunteers.

In addition to funding legal services for District residents, the Initiative supports student loan repayment for lawyers employed by nonprofit legal services providers. This relatively modest investment keeps highly qualified, experienced lawyers serving District residents and is a key recruitment and retention tool for nonprofit legal employers.

Access to legal assistance makes a real difference. Without the civil legal aid to help District residents navigate complicated issues and secure protections, our community's challenges will increase as unaddressed legal problems spiral into additional crises. Often, the consequences of these unmet needs ultimately will be borne by the government. An effective program like the Initiative that provides assistance early in the legal process is good for the community and relieves the burden on government institutions. Drastic cuts to the Initiative would place this benefit to the community and government in serious jeopardy.

We thank each of you for recognizing the importance of providing access to justice for the residents of the District of Columbia. Initiative funding is the engine that keeps our legal services provider network running and our pro bono partnerships thriving. Along with the listed Past Presidents of the D.C. Bar, 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.

Sincerely,



Charles R. Lowery, Jr.
President, 2023-2024



Shaun Snyder
President-Elect, 2023-2024

Past Presidents of the D.C. Bar In Support of the Access to Justice Initiative

Charles R. Work	1976-77
Robert L. Weinberg	1978-79
Marna S. Tucker	1984-85
Hon. Paul L. Friedman	1986-87
Philip A. Lacovara	1988-89
Sara-Ann Determan	1990-91
Jamie S. Gorelick	1992-93
Mark H. Tuohey III	1993-94
Pauline A. Schneider	1994-95
Robert N. Weiner	1995-96
Myles V. Lynk	1996-97
Carolyn B. Lamm	1997-98
Andrew H. Marks	1998-99
Joan H. Strand	1999-2000
John W. Nields Jr.	2000-01
Shirley Ann Higuchi	2003-04
John (Jack) C. Keeney	2004-05
John C. Cruden	2005-06
James J. Sandman	2006-07
Melvin White	2007-08
Robert J. Spagnoletti	2008-09
Kim Michele Keenan	2009-10
Ronald S. Flagg	2010-11
Darrell G. Mottley	2011-12
Andrea Ferster	2013-14
Brigida Benitez	2014-15
Timothy K. Webster	2015-16
Annamaria Steward	2016-17
Patrick McGlone	2017-18
Esther H. Lim	2018-19
Susan M. Hoffman	2019-20
Geoffrey M. Klineberg	2020-21
Chad T. Sarchio	2021-22
Ellen M. Jakovic	2022-23

District Law Firms Urge Consistent Funding for Civil Legal Services

May 1, 2024

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

RE: FY25 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 twenty-eight 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 2025 budget reduces 67% of the \$31.7 million allocated for the Initiative in fiscal year 2024, leaving only \$10.457 million in funding. Chairman Mendelson has rightly sounded the alarm about this drastic proposed decrease, which would have devastating consequences for District residents, and erase significant progress made in the past three fiscal years to address chronic justice gaps in high-need areas. **We urge the Council to prioritize the restoration of FY24 funding of \$31.7 million.**

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. Initiative funds help District residents maintain affordable housing, protect their wages and jobs, stabilize credit, aid children and families get healthy, guard against abuse, and protect District elders – all of which ultimately promote community resiliency, stability, and public safety. Eliminating historic investments made in the program in the past three fiscal years is especially damaging when community need for these vital services continues to increase.

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. Pro bono service

simply could not fill the drastic gap in services that would be created by the proposed funding cuts to the Access to Justice Initiative – and to the contrary, the cut would dramatically diminish our ability to provide pro bono support at current levels. Our attorneys rely on the work these providers and their staff 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 FY24 levels.

Sincerely,

Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP - Anthony T. Pierce, DC Office Managing Partner
ArentFox Schiff - Brian Waldman, Firmwide Managing Partner
Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP - Richard M. Alexander, Chair
Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP - Michael A. Gerstenzang, Managing Partner
Covington & Burling LLP - Douglas G. Gibson, Chair
Crowell & Moring LLP - Philip T. Inghima, Chair, Management Board
Dechert LLP - David Forti and Mark Thierfelder, Co-Chairs
DLA Piper - William H. Minor, DC Office Managing Partner
Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner LLP - Erika Arner, Managing Partner
Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP - Michael J. Alter, DC Office Managing Partner
Hogan Lovells - Ajay Kuntamukkala, DC Office Managing Partner
Jenner & Block LLP - Lindsay Harrison, DC Managing Partner
Kirkland & Ellis LLP - Leslie M. Smith, Pro Bono Committee Chair
Latham & Watkins LLP - Amanda Reeves, DC Office Managing Partner
Lowenstein Sandler LLP - Zarema Jaramillo, DC Office Managing Partner
Mayer Brown LLP - Elizabeth Espín Stern, DC Office Managing Partner
McDermott Will & Emery LLP - Paul M. Thompson, DC Office Managing Partner
Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP - Jami Wintz McKeon, Chair

Morrison & Foerster LLP - Natalie Fleming Nolen, DC Managing Partner

Nixon Peabody LLP - Colette A. Dafoe, Office Managing Partner, DC Office

Perkins Coie LLP - Vivek Chopra, DC Office Managing Partner

Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP - Madeleine McDonough, Chair

Sidley Austin LLP - Kristin Graham Koehler, Management Committee Member & DC Office Managing Partner

Skadden, Arps, Meagher, & Flom LLP - Pankaj K. Sinha, DC Office Managing Partner

Squire Patton Boggs - Michael A. Curto, Managing Partner

Stephoe LLP - Gwendolyn Prothro Renigar, Chair

Wiley Rein LLP - Peter Shields, Managing Partner

Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP - Kimberly Parker, Partner & Co-Chair of Firmwide Pro Bono Committee



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

Board Chair

Jane M. Brown

Board Treasurer

Toreico O'Neal

Secretary

Saba Bireda

Board Members

Tracey Davis

Dr. Tanna C. Jackson

Nike O. Opadiran

Molly Whalen

Executive Director

Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas

V: (202) 678-8060

F: (202) 678-8062

TF: (888) 327-8060

W: www.aje-dc.org

E: information@aje-dc.org

1200 G Street NW Ste. 650

Washington, DC 20005

Mary's Center

Tuesdays & Thursdays

9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

3912 Georgia Avenue NW

Washington, DC 20011

**Children with
Special Needs,
need Parents
with Special
Skills!**

April 24, 2024

Chairperson Phil Mendelson and D.C. Councilmembers

City Council of the District of Columbia

350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Chairperson Mendelson and D.C. Councilmembers:

I am Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas, Executive Director of Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE), a DC native and a Ward 4 resident. I write to share the critical role the Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative funds play in our ability to support some of DC's most vulnerable residents. AJE, founded in 1996, is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)¹ for the District of Columbia. Each year we assist over 2,000 DC families through direct services, training, and advocacy in navigating the District's public education system (including, special education, school discipline and more), helping them to understand and protect their rights to ensure children have access to an appropriate education.² A quality education is the necessary foundation for giving DC's children and youth, particularly those with disabilities and special health care needs, the fair shot they deserve.

For over the last 13 years, AJE has received ATJ Initiative funds to provide direct legal assistance to DC families. With this funding, AJE has been able to expand our one-of-a-kind pro bono attorney program for private attorneys to provide legal representation to DC students facing wrongful suspension or expulsion from school, increasing the number of families who have access to a lawyer to protect their rights. Also, AJE was able to establish the first advice and counsel legal clinic within the DC Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) to provide legal assistance to unrepresented parents and students who appear for DCPS disciplinary hearings, helping them to understand the hearing process, their rights and how to defend against improper disciplinary actions. Further, we have been able to increase the size of our legal staff. As a result, AJE has been able to provide legal assistance to hundreds of families helping to keep their children in school and ensuring they receive the special education services and support they are entitled to and need.

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic was devastating for DC residents. It especially challenged our education system compounding the existing inequities across race, class

¹ The White House, in a 2022 [press release](#), highlighted PTI's and the resources they provide to families as part of its strategy in centering equity and accessibility for individuals with disabilities in its COVID-19 response.

² "Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy, and sustainable human development." Kofi Annan

and disability. Since the full return to in-person learning in 2022 through this school year, the repercussions of COVID-19 are still being felt with students not receiving access to education. This school year, schools have failed to comply with the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2018 (SFASA) resorting to old patterns of simply excluding students from school with the highest needs. Also, schools have failed to provide students with appropriate services. DC's state education agency has failed to provide sufficient and reliable transportation for students with disabilities to get to school. And the number of Family's seeking our assistance this school year remained high, an increase by 117% over the same period during the 2021-2022 school year. Because of the increase in ATJ Initiative funding in FY22 and FY23, we increased the number of lawyers from 3 to 5, and with level funded in FY2024, we have been able to maintain five lawyers to support the high demand for assistance and our capacity to collaborate with other legal services organizations on systems change.

This school year our lawyers we were able to: (1) help a parent prevent a DCPS school from wrongfully suspending her pre-k aged student and to obtain immediate, interim services pending completion of the special education process; (2) In collaboration with a Georgetown Law School Clinic, work to ensure that students are not excluded from aftercare programs because of their disability. One such effort resulted in an agreement between DCPS and the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) that will benefit all students with disabilities, after a parent filed an OCR complaint when her child was excluded from a DCPS aftercare program because of their disability; and (3) prevented multiple attempts of improper involuntary transfers of students from their attending DCPS school for alleged disciplinary reasons. There has been an increase in DCPS using involuntary transfers instead of disciplinary actions to remove students from schools. This strategy circumvents the requirements of the SFASA to provide students with a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge at OAH. The increased need for our legal assistance has not diminished and we expect the need for our legal assistance to increase in FY25 with the city's plans around school safety and approach to addressing truancy issues.

Legal assistance in public education is not only important but necessary to prevent further segregation by race, income-level, and disability of DC's children, (which increases the achievement and wealth gaps) and to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Without continued ATJ Initiative funds, at least at the levels provided over the last three fiscal years, we will lose 34% our legal services budget and will not be able to maintain the number of lawyers to support the needs of families for advice, direct educational support, legal assistance, advocacy and know your rights trainings, or to maintain at a functional level the programs developed to expand families access to legal assistance. The impact will not only be felt by DC families but our attorneys of whom all but one are DC residents residing in wards 4, 5, 7 and 8. Thus, the ATJ Initiative funds are critically important to the success of DC's residents and future and we ask that the Committee and Mayor Bowser view investments in AJE and in all the District's legal services as an investment in the community itself and fully fund the Access to Justice Initiative to demonstrate your commitment to equity and civil justice for all.

Sincerely,



Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas
Executive Director



To: Chairperson Pinto, Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
From: Caroline Ackerman, Executive Director
Re: Access to Justice Initiative/OVSJG Funding
Date: April 25, 2024

As the Executive Director for the Amara Legal Center, I am writing to express our support for the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ) and the advocacy efforts of the DC Access to Justice Commission in securing funding for the program. The ATJ Initiative and OVSJG provide critical support for legal assistance for District residents, particularly those from vulnerable populations.

The ATJ Initiative and OVSJG serve as Amara's largest funding streams. Thanks to this funding, Amara is able to provide free, high-quality, trauma-informed legal services in the DC-metro area to anyone involved in commercial sex - whether that involvement is by choice, fraud, coercion, circumstance or necessity. Our clients are sex trafficking survivors and sex workers who are marginalized in society and face complex legal issues. Since its founding in 2013, Amara has provided free legal services to over 500 clients with over 800 legal matters in the DC-metro area. Our practice areas include civil protection orders, family law, name and gender marker changes, vacatur and sealing of criminal records, and victim-witness advocacy.

Funding for free legal services in DC is increasingly important to the work that Amara does, especially knowing that DC is a magnet for sex trafficking because of its unique geographic location on the I-95 corridor and close proximity to a number of casinos and professional sports venues. After leaving a trafficking situation, survivors often face complicated legal issues, such as contested custody cases when there is a child in common with the trafficker. These legal issues can significantly impact survivors' capacity to attain safety, stability, and healing after the victimization.

In the best of situations, navigating the legal system can be challenging but this is especially true for individuals who have experienced trauma. The majority of Amara's clients are women of color who were born and raised in the DC-metropolitan area and have experienced homelessness, poverty, and severe trauma as sex trafficking survivors. Without access to the free legal assistance that Amara and other stakeholders provide, our clients would be further marginalized by barriers to employment, housing, education, and the opportunity to reunify their families. ATJ and OVSJG funding allows us to reach individuals who otherwise would not have access to legal remedies, or would have no choice but to navigate the legal system pro se, which often results in retraumatization and poor case outcomes. With ATJ and OVSJG funding, we have also provided numerous trainings to increase the identification of trafficking survivors and to provide access to free, trauma-informed legal assistance for survivors and sex workers in the DC-metro area. In 2023, Amara conducted over 20 trainings, including Know Your Rights events for community members and Human Trafficking 101 trainings for service providers, medical professionals, lawyers, and other targeted groups.

Amara extends its sincere gratitude to the Committee for its long-standing support of the ATJ Initiative and OVSJG's victim services funding. Furthermore, we strongly encourage the Committee to maintain its investment in these vital programs to address the many legal needs of DC residents.



March 29, 2024

*Transforming Lives.
Strengthening Communities.*

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

Board of Directors

Paul Lee (*Chair*)
Steptoe & Johnson LLP

Veronica Nannis (*Vice Chair*)
Joseph Greenwald & Laake LLP

Jill Flack (*Secretary*)

Kevin Metz (*Treasurer*)

Agnes Buanya
CareFirst

Joyce Cowan

Alejandro Guadarrama
Skadden LLP

Hans Manzke
The Clearing, Inc.

Miguel Martinez Jr.
PwC

Sadina Montani
Crowell & Moring LLP

Victoria Ortega
Blank Rome LLP

Marie Talwar
General Electric Company

José Antonio Tijerino
Hispanic Heritage Foundation

Samir Varma
Thompson Hine LLP

Executive Director
Paula Fitzgerald, Esq.

Washington, D.C. Office
1990 K ST NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 387-4848

Virginia Office
2701 Prosperity Ave., Suite
300
Fairfax, VA 22031
(703) 444-7009

Maryland Office
8757 Georgia Ave, Suite 800
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(240) 594-0600

www.ayuda.com

I am writing on behalf of Ayuda regarding the importance of Access to Justice Initiative support for Ayuda's services. Ayuda's mission is to advocate for low-income immigrants through direct legal, social, and language services; training; and outreach in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. We envision a community where all immigrants succeed and thrive in the United States.

Community Legal Interpreter Bank

With funding from the Access to Justice Initiative, Ayuda's Community Legal Interpreter Bank provides free, professional interpretation and document translation services to more than 40 nonprofits that provide civil legal services to D.C. residents. The language access services provided by this project have proven to be essential for our partnered nonprofit organizations in their serving limited English proficient/non-English proficient (LEP) and Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (Deaf) individuals.

Our project helps ensure that D.C. residents are not deprived of vital services because of the languages that they use to communicate. Since the founding of the Access to Justice Initiative, our city has made great improvements in meeting the legal needs of low-income residents; more and more people are being helped. The only way to ensure that the expansion of services is equitable is to grow the Community Legal Interpreter Bank proportionately, so that LEP and Deaf clients are not left out.

In recent years, increased funding from the Access to Justice Initiative has been essential in allowing our program to try to keep pace with demands, even as new legal services hotlines have become available, new attorneys have been hired, new pro bono partnerships with law firms have been forged, and new organizations have emerged. Increased funding has also allowed us to offer interpreter trainings, increasing the pool of trained professionals who can work with lawyers and their clients in an out-of-court setting. However, even with increased funding, our project is underfunded. Often, we must decline to fill requests for assistance because of a lack of funding.

The D.C. Code establishes that one of the purposes of the Access to Justice Initiative is to provide a shared legal interpreter bank, an innovative and essential project. As a result of the project, legal service providers can turn to a shared resource to meet all of their language access needs. They should be able to rely on that service. When the Bank is underfunded, requests go unfilled and legal services clients suffer. Legal services nonprofits are faced with untenable options, such as using a client's family member as an interpreter (in violation of ethical and professional standards) or using a volunteer interpreter (who may be untrained and do damage to the client's case). The Access to Justice Initiative has been imperative for our program as we work in service of the city's pursuit of language justice, and any decrease in the budget would



*Transforming Lives.
Strengthening Communities.*

Board of Directors

Paul Lee (*Chair*)
Steptoe & Johnson LLP

Veronica Nannis (*Vice Chair*)
Joseph Greenwald & Laake LLP

Jill Flack (*Secretary*)

Kevin Metz (*Treasurer*)

Agnes Buanya
CareFirst

Joyce Cowan

Alejandro Guadarrama
Skadden LLP

Hans Manzke
The Clearing, Inc.

Miguel Martinez Jr.
PwC

Sadina Montani
Crowell & Moring LLP

Victoria Ortega
Blank Rome LLP

Marie Talwar
General Electric Company

José Antonio Tijerino
Hispanic Heritage Foundation

Samir Varma
Thompson Hine LLP

Executive Director

Paula Fitzgerald, Esq.

Washington, D.C. Office
1990 K ST NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 387-4848

Virginia Office
2701 Prosperity Ave., Suite
300
Fairfax, VA 22031
(703) 444-7009

Maryland Office
8757 Georgia Ave, Suite 800
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(240) 594-0600

www.ayuda.com

do great harm to D.C. legal service providers and their LEP and Deaf clients.

Project END: Protecting Immigrants from Consumer Fraud

Project END combats and addresses fraud uniquely harmful to low-income immigrants, such as immigration legal services scam and bail bond schemes. We combat fraud by providing consumer education and KYRs, and we address it through civil and criminal restitution efforts and rehabilitative immigration work. Project END seeks to prevent and address consumer fraud affecting immigrants through four methods: 1) Direct representation of victims: To address consumer fraud in the District, staff represent and advocate for clients by liaising with law enforcement; assisting with filing complaints; and applying for forms of immigration relief. 2) Community education and technical trainings: Project END distributes videos and memes via social media and to a list of area partners, as well as provides Know Your Rights presentations and trainings. In 2022, Project END collaborated with several D.C.-area non-profits to provide virtual KYRs. 3) Pro bono screenings: To address the confusion around changes in immigration law and the high need for consults, pro bono attorneys provide individual immigration consultations under Ayuda's mentorship. Pro Bono attorneys screen for immigration legal services fraud and Project END follows up with potential clients for in-house legal representation. 4) Client-centered advocacy: Project END liaises with D.C. and federal agencies to advocate for policies that assist victims.

In 2024, an election year in which immigration is a prominent topic, we anticipate continued confusion over changes in immigration law and policy, likely resulting in increased consumer fraud by unscrupulous non attorneys, government imposters, as well as fraud against immigrants seeking a driver's license, immigration bail bonds, English language courses, or other related services. Project END is particularly concerned about the recently-arrived migrants to the District, who are uniquely vulnerable to fraud. Project END provides legal orientations to recently-arrived migrants, but needs ongoing support in order to reach this population through 2024 and beyond.

Recently Arrived Immigrants Program

The Access to Justice Initiative also funds our Recently Arrived Immigrants Program, which provides comprehensive legal services, including consultations, brief services, and extended representation to recently arrived immigrants, as well as legal education events and training to local service providers. Although the border-state chartered buses that began transporting newly arrived migrants in 2022 have largely stopped operating, Ayuda anticipates that the newly arrived migrant population will continue growing as people arrive in the area via other means to reunite with their friends and families. Newly arrived immigrants face challenges accessing work permits because of their immigration status and lack the established community networks of other immigrants with more time living in the area. As such, many are living in economically precarious conditions, which leaves them vulnerable to food instability, homelessness, and crime victimization. The need for expert legal counsel for newly arriving migrants continues to increase, outpacing our capacity. Ayuda remains



*Transforming Lives.
Strengthening Communities.*

Board of Directors

Paul Lee (*Chair*)
Step toe & Johnson LLP

Veronica Nannis (*Vice Chair*)
Joseph Greewald & Laake LLP

Jill Flack (*Secretary*)

Kevin Metz (*Treasurer*)

Agnes Buanya
CareFirst

Joyce Cowan

Alejandro Guadarrama
Skadden LLP

Hans Manzke
The Clearing, Inc.

Miguel Martinez Jr.
PwC

Sadina Montani
Crowell & Moring LLP

Victoria Ortega
Blank Rome LLP

Marie Talwar
General Electric Company

José Antonio Tijerino
Hispanic Heritage Foundation

Samir Varma
Thompson Hine LLP

Executive Director

Paula Fitzgerald, Esq.

Washington, D.C. Office

1990 K ST NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 387-4848

Virginia Office

2701 Prosperity Ave., Suite
300
Fairfax, VA 22031
(703) 444-7009

Maryland Office

8757 Georgia Ave, Suite 800
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(240) 594-0600

www.ayuda.com

committed to helping to meet increased demand; we urge the Council to support this essential work by increasing funding for the Access to Justice Initiative.

Ayuda is thankful to the D.C. Council for its longstanding support of the Access to Justice Initiative, and we urge the Council to continue its commitment to fully funding this invaluable resource. If we can provide additional information about the importance of Access to Justice Initiative support for Ayuda's services for D.C. residents, please don't hesitate to contact me at Paula.Fitzgerald@ayuda.com or 202-243-7318.

Sincerely,

Paula Fitzgerald
Executive Director



JUSTICE ADVOCACY MEDICAL
SERVICE FOOD services DIGNITY
RESPECT SOCIAL servi
CLOTHING services LEGAL

Without the meaningful access to justice this [Access to Justice] funding provides, the District risks reversing the progress made, perpetuating racial and economic disparities for many in the District.

George A. Jones, Chief Executive Officer, Bread for the City

Bread for the City is a private non-profit agency that works on behalf of and alongside D.C. residents living with low income, predominantly people of color, as they fight for the opportunity to live and thrive in the nation's capital. Bread for the City provides food, clothing, social services, medical care, and civil legal services to reduce the burden of poverty.

The Access to Justice Initiative grants have been an invaluable source of foundational support for Bread for the City's Legal Clinic.

Over the years, with this stable source of funding, Bread for the City has been able to improve access to justice by, among other things, increasing the number of legal staff available to help District residents who cannot afford an attorney in matters concerning basic human rights, including maintaining safe, affordable housing and safety for families from domestic violence.

The Access to Justice Initiative funds five legal projects and a total of 16.63 FTE legal staff at Bread for the City:

Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program

Housing Preservation Project: 8.71 FTE legal staff

Access to Justice Grants Program

Child Support Community Legal Services Project: 1.25 FTE legal staff

Domestic Violence Community Legal Services Project: 2.75 FTE legal staff

Eviction Prevention in Community: 1.17 FTE legal staff

Movement Lawyering Practice: 2.75 FTE legal staff

The Mayor's budget calls for a 67% cut in the Access to Justice Initiative. For Bread for the City, that means losing:

11.14 FTE legal staff or

(1) the entire *Housing Preservation Project*, which provides legal assistance to tenants facing the threat of eviction or loss of a housing subsidy and helps staff the city-wide hotline for tenants (the Landlord-Tenant Legal Assistance Network), **and** (2) the *Domestic Violence Community Legal Services Project*, which offers legal services (Civil Protection Orders, custody, divorce, child support, public benefits, immigration) to low-income DC residents who have experienced or are experiencing domestic and/or family violence.

The impact on our primarily Black and brown clients would be detrimental – they will no longer have attorneys and an organization that has their backs. They will no longer have attorneys who serve as advocates inside and outside the courtroom, reminding all who will listen that low-income residents of the District matter.

A sustained commitment to fund civil legal services is critical to ensuring the existence of a legal safety net for the city's most marginalized residents.

SOUTHEAST CENTER

1700 Good Hope Road, SE
Washington, DC 20020
phone: (202) 561-8587
fax: (202) 587-0537

NORTHWEST CENTER

1525 Seventh Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
phone: (202) 265-2400
fax: (202) 587-0537

www.breadforthecity.org

info@breadforthecity.org

UW# 8219 CFC# 61733



@BreadfortheCity

ACCESS TO JUSTICE FUNDING IMPROVES CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Unsafe housing, inadequate education, exposure to violence, lack of good health care and other problems related to poverty, trauma and racism can harm children's physical and behavioral health. Through our Healthy Together Medical-Legal Partnership, Children's Law Center partners with pediatricians in eight community health centers and clinics to find and fix the root causes of a child's health problem. Last year, we received **over 1,300 new referrals** from our partners.

We have relied on funding for our Healthy Together program through the Access to Justice program since its inception. Together with funding from private sources, this funding has allowed us to expand and then consistently maintain our presence in Wards 5, 7 and 8.

With funding from both the Access to Justice and Civil Legal Counsel Project Program grants last year, we were able to provide legal services to District children and families who were referred to us by our health clinic partners and:

- Reach approximately **600 children and families** each year;
- **Resolve problems that impact children's health** related to housing conditions, housing security, special education, school choice, developmental issues for infants and toddlers, bullying, health care access, public benefits, guardianship and custody;
- **Meet families in their own neighborhoods** by making lawyers part of the medical teams at THEARC, the Children's National Anacostia Clinic and Unity on Minnesota Avenue along with five other clinics and health care centers across the District;
- **Give hundreds of parents and caregivers the information they need** to advocate for their own children;
- **Train 75+ pediatricians and other medical staff each year** to solve problems related to housing, school and public benefits that are impacting a child's health – and prevent the need for a lawyer; and
- **Avoid \$14.1M in Medicaid costs** over a three-year period (for entire Healthy Together program).

Although the funding is for direct legal services provided by Children's Law Center, the expertise, experience and relationships developed have had important ripple effects:

- Hundreds of additional children and families are now helped each year by **volunteer lawyers** working in the District's major law firms; and
- Children's Law Center now **provides its expertise to the District government, the DC Council and the DC Courts** through participation on the Medical Care Advisory Committee and the Citizen's Review Panel, and at DC Council hearings, Court committees and other similar forums.

The Impact on DC Children and Families

Marina: We worked with Ms. Jeffries* after her daughter, Marina, was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome after being assaulted at school and her school did not give her the necessary accommodations. She feared for her safety, which exacerbated her anxiety and depression, plus she suffered from severe migraines after the concussion. She went from being an honor roll student to struggling in school.

Although her mother was fighting for her, the school was not listening. Children's Law Center advocated alongside Ms. Jeffries to get an appropriate plan in place and now Marina is back on track to graduate.

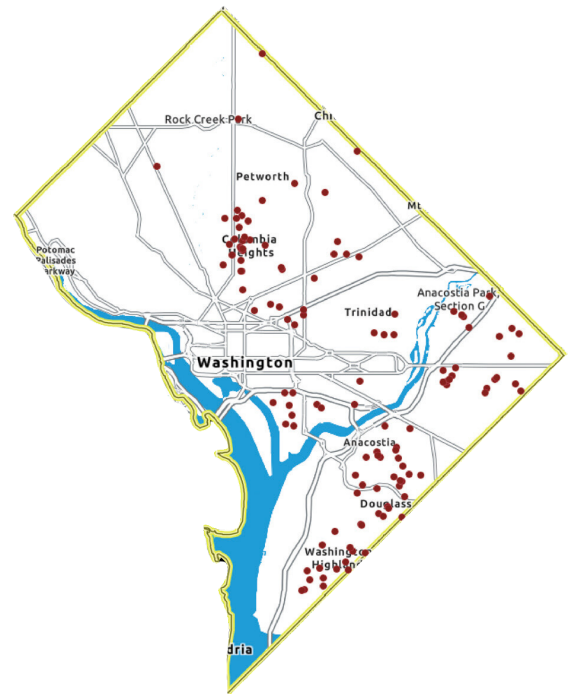


The Robertson Family: When her sister became ill, Ms. Robertson stepped forward to take custody of her niece and nephew, made extra challenging by needing to learn how to navigate DC's special education system for her nephew. Children's Law Center, with help from pro bono lawyers in the District, helped Ms. Robertson navigate the courts to ensure permanency for the children, and we are now providing legal services to support her nephew's education.

Tiffany and her family: We often advocate for families whose health is being impacted by the housing conditions they live in, most often where the landlord's failure to repair mold or to properly exterminate for mice, rats, and roaches leads to a child's asthma being exacerbated in the home even when they are taking all of their asthma medications. We met Tiffany* and her children last summer after she had already spent three years fighting DCHA for healthier housing. We pursued a housing conditions case and pressured DCHA to look at other options. Tiffany reported an almost immediate change after our involvement, but unfortunately it was only after we were able to help her move with a voucher that she was able to be in healthy housing for the long term.

We meet hundreds of families like Tiffany's every year – and know that thousands of children live in apartment complexes with the same unhealthy conditions. Every month that goes without healthy housing is a month where children are facing health issues – and added emotional trauma on the family.

We use the data we get from our cases to better understand how to serve our clients. Over the past two years, we worked with Children's National Hospital to create an interactive map of the DC apartment buildings with the highest rates of pediatric asthma and worst asthma hazard conditions based on our housing conditions cases and where other housing conditions complaints are in DC. This map is driving important housing conditions work in DC, including work within our CLCPP grant.



- Each red dot = multi-family buildings that display both high rates of asthma-related pediatric emergency department visits and unhealthy housing conditions that have been reported to DC government for violations.

*Ms. Jeffries, Marina and Tiffany are pseudonyms being used at the request of the clients.



April 24, 2024

My name is Whitney King and I serve as the executive director of Christian Legal Aid of the District of Columbia (CLADC). We believe that everyone deserves access to justice, and thank the Mayor and the City Council for investing in needed civil legal services for the District's most vulnerable residents.

Alongside legal services providers across the city, CLADC has provided legal help to hundreds of homeless and low-income residents **across all eight wards** with life-changing results. This is due in large part to the Access to Justice Initiative—40% of our fiscal year 2024 budget relies on Access to Justice funding. With Access to Justice support, and in growing partnership with law schools, law firms, social service providers, and churches, CLADC has been able to meet more of the growing demand for our services. From 2022 to 2023, we opened 32 percent more cases for D.C. residents, and based on the first quarter of 2024, the need is only growing. **CLADC's caseload on behalf of low-income District residents is projected to increase another 39 percent in 2024.**

Two of CLADC's core practice areas in particular, criminal record sealing and probate administration, have far-reaching effects on the livelihoods and security of families in the District.

Through our criminal record sealing work, CLADC helps remove a significant barrier to viable employment for the 1 in 7 D.C. residents who have a publicly available criminal record.¹ Though the law allows for criminal records to be sealed under certain circumstances, it is exceedingly difficult for those in poverty to secure this right on their own. Without legal aid, thousands of residents continue to experience the collateral consequences of arrests, even if they were never convicted of a crime.

Once records are sealed, however; the story changes. A recent study published in Harvard Law Review found that expungement resulted in a wage increase of 22 percent on average within one year.² An investment in legal services yields an ongoing return in the lives of D.C. residents and their families. At CLADC, we receive hundreds of referrals for record sealing services each year, and that number is only growing. **We are projected to help 20 percent more D.C. residents break down barriers to employment and opportunity through record sealing this year, thanks to Access to Justice funding.**

Cuts to Access to Justice funding would directly result in our reduced capacity to meet the legal needs of our low-income neighbors who are already underserved, and this burden would also be felt across our court system.

¹ Duane, M., Reimal, E., and Lynch, M. Urban Institute. (July 2017). *Criminal Background Checks and Access to Jobs: A Case Study of Washington, DC*.

² Prescott, J.J. and Starr, Sonja B. *Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical Study*, 133 HARV. L. REV. 2460 (2020)

For example, consider the issue of probate administration in the District. When people lack legal advice, they often visit court clerks repeatedly in attempts to complete the correct forms; however, clerks are necessarily constrained from providing the degree of help that many people need. The inefficiencies and frustrations are felt by everyone involved, yet legal advice provides relief for residents and an already burdened court system.

Probate administration is another example of a legal issue that intersects with many basic needs for low-income D.C. families and can be part of exacerbating *or* intervening in cycles of poverty. Access to Justice funding has been critical to CLADC's ability to step in before the complexities of probate cases exacerbate the cycles poverty for many District residents.

I thank the Mayor and City Council for their investments in the Access to Justice Initiative to date. This has already led to life-changing results for many of D.C.'s low-income residents, but the need is still great, and it is growing. We join the Access to Justice Commission in urging the Council to ensure that civil legal aid providers are able to meet this need head-on.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Whitney King". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Whitney King
Executive Director



COMMITTED TO ACCESSIBLE CIVIL JUSTICE

April 2024

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 low- and 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 – needs that are ever-present and mounting across our comprehensive family law, probate, estate planning, and immigration law practices.

For one, 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 3,000 low-income DC residents who have turned to FLAN for the rapid-response assistance we are uniquely situated to deliver. Since its inception, FLAN has seen remarkable growth and success. Year after year, from 2020 to 2023, FLAN has seen a steady increase in the number of individuals referred for legal services. To date, FLAN has received a total of 3,036 eligible referrals, with 986 in 2023 alone. This marks a notable increase compared to previous years: a 70% percent rise from 2020, a 28.7% jump from 2021, and a 55.5% escalation from 2022. This growth reflects FLAN’s dedication to ensuring that everyone has access to the legal help they need. It’s also a testament to the trust the community places in our services. FLAN has been an indispensable resource for the overwhelmingly Black and brown families living in poverty within the District of Columbia. FLAN was a lifeline in helping a father with acute, chronic medical conditions devise a custodial plan for his small children in the event of his incapacity or death, FLAN helped an aunt become the legal third-party caregiver to an orphaned child against all odds to prevent the child becoming a Ward of the city, and has been a lifeline and the go-to 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 a household name within the District of Columbia.

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 in which each organization plays 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. The Access to Justice Grant program is the single dedicated source of funding for DCALF’s involvement in FLAN, and our sister FLAN organizations each receive Access to Justice Funding to sustain their involvement in FLAN. If FLAN and our broader legal services community were unable to function as it does today, the 986 individuals who sought FLAN’s assistance last year would have nowhere to turn for assistance, creating a slippery slope of costly societal challenges for individual families with much broader societal implications. As it is, the access to justice gap is extraordinarily large, and would become a gaping, insurmountable abyss if Access to Justice funding is cut in any way.

WWW.DCAFFORDABLELAW.ORG



COMMITTED TO ACCESSIBLE CIVIL JUSTICE

Notably, FLAN is but one of the programs DCALF runs thanks to Access to Justice funding. Access to Justice funding supports *all* of DCALF's programs, and made it possible for DCALF to possible for us to provide *free* family law, probate, estate planning, and immigration representation to more than 420 low-wage earning residents in DC's FY2023, a number we will absolutely exceed in FY24.

Access to Justice funding serves the most economically vulnerable in our community, and it is important to remember who these clients are. The clients we serve at DC Affordable Law Firm have full-time jobs, contribute to our city's tax revenue, and frequent DC businesses. They are also families that are struggling simply to get by, their legal needs being just one of the many stressors compounding the stresses of living in an extraordinarily expensive jurisdiction they are otherwise proud to call home. The *Wall Street Journal* recently featured an article highlighting the extraordinary vulnerability and very real, mounting challenges faced by families who live just above poverty levels. These are the everyday Washingtonians who comprise roughly one-fifth of our city's population, the clients we serve every day at DCALF. For a city that prides itself on enabling families to live and thrive in the District, we need to look closely at what that means and the vital role Access to Justice-legal services play in making that goal achievable. Access to justice funding means an intergenerational family of native Washingtonians, to be able to preserve a third-generation home against foreclosure and tax sale, because probate was a concept that no one explained to surviving children when their beloved parent died. Access to justice means the ability for a woman dying of breast cancer to be able to execute estate planning documents to preserve the safety of her children beyond her impending death and pass on her legacy. Access to justice means the ability for an immigrant teenager who walked thousands of miles on foot to seek physical and emotional safety and safe refuge in our proud Sanctuary City. Access to justice means that a parent can grieve while his lawyer navigates the tedious, arcane curvatures of probate laws to secure the digital photos that chronicled the life of his deceased young adult child. Access to justice means a domestic violence survivor having a lawyer by her side every step of the way throughout a child custody dispute spanning four years. DC is a city that I and hundreds of thousands that are proud to call home, families who deserve to maintain a future in the District where their most fundamental basic legal needs can be met. This is what the access to justice program means, and this is why DC stands apart from many other cities as an inspiration and a beacon of what is possible when community members are valued as humans, and able to access the basic right to counsel that all Americans deserve.

Aside from clients, as a 16-plus year practitioner in DC's legal services world, what I find most inspirational is the way in which the individuals who comprise our community of legal services providers, themselves, earn modest salaries, in spite of holding degrees that costs well \$100,000 to acquire and, day-after-day, pour themselves into this work in the representation of our city's modest and low-income families. Our hardworking lawyers choose to follow their passions to serve our city's most vulnerable, foregoing salaries that could range hundreds of thousand dollars beyond what they could make to, instead, do this crucial work funded by the Access to Justice program. Our lawyers not only do the work day-after-day, but our community continues to innovate, identify more gaps and injustices, and derive creative, collaborative solutions to meet the needs of our city's residents. I am overwhelmed with pride to be part of this community and to be part of the solution that makes our city better, and our residents better supported. Our legal services community is not asking for much. What we ask is for our hard-working colleagues to be able to do this work and for our organizations to be able to persist because – without a fully funded Access to Justice Program – the realities are simply too daunting to swallow and bear consequences no one on the Council would like to see become a reality.

Access to Justice funding comprises 21% of our organization's funding. A precipitous drop in funding will absolutely result in fewer hardworking, low-income Black and brown clients served, more families who do not secure legal status, who can't keep their homes or their family's hard-earned possessions, or who can't afford to continue living

WWW.DCAFFORDABLELAW.ORG



COMMITTED TO ACCESSIBLE CIVIL JUSTICE

and raising a family in the District they call home. Anything short of full restoration of the Access to Justice funds seeded in FY2024 will not only include scaling back on staff and decreasing the number of clients served in a year. Our organization – like many of our sister organizations – will inevitably need to reduce headcount and lose the talented lawyers and colleagues who give so much of themselves to be able to work in DC on behalf of DC residents. DCALF not only serves clients who live across all eight wards, but DCALF also boasts a DC-centric staff of colleagues who live in seven of our city’s eight wards. Anything short of full restoration of the Access to Justice grant program will send shockwaves that will be felt hardest among our overwhelmingly Black and brown client base in Wards 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8 – but will also have drastic implications for the legal services employees who live in communities across the District.

Access to Justice is an essential program with a proven record of accomplishment; the Council knows this, as evinced by the Council’s commitment to Access to Justice year after year. Access to Justice funding helps to cure critical legal issues and prevent exacerbation of others, strengthens our social safety net and families’ economic security, enables people to remain as DC residents, and makes accessible justice a reality for the approximately 43% of our city’s residents living in households below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level.

On behalf of my colleagues and the hundreds of 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 \$31.7M, FY2024 level our city’s residents deserve. Thank you for your partnership in enhancing equity within our city and supporting Access to Justice.

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

**Access to Justice Initiative
 Stabilizes and Empowers Families, Prevents Eviction,
 Preserves Affordable Housing, and Advances Racial Justice**

The D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center is the District's largest provider of pro bono legal services. The Pro Bono Center leverages a small, expert staff with over 1,500 volunteer lawyers annually to assist our neighbors who are least able to afford legal help to preserve their homes; ensure their housing is safe and secure; protect and stabilize their families; and access disability benefits to meet their most basic needs.

The Access to Justice Initiative has been critical to the Pro Bono Center's ability to meet the crucial legal needs of low-income D.C. residents. Without this funding, the Pro Bono Center would be forced to reduce services to low-income residents amid record-high increases in requests for assistance.

Access to Justice Initiative Funding



Increase in Requests for Legal Help



In 2023, Access to Justice Initiative funding enabled the Pro Bono Center to:

Provide Legal Information, Counseling, and Representation to 812 Low-Income Residents in their Family Law Matters

- The Family Law Assistance Network (FLAN), a partnership with DC Affordable Law Firm and Legal Aid DC, provides a single point of entry for unrepresented, low-income DC residents to receive rapid-response legal assistance and representation in divorce, child custody, child support, and parentage cases. Partners serve clients remotely every weekday and in-person 4 days a week at D.C. Superior Court. **Since inception in 2020, this partnership has served over 3,300 residents.**
- FLAN collaborates with the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA) to empower returning citizens to preserve and protect their families.
- Several examples of FLAN's many successful outcomes include helping a father secure custody of his children to provide them medical care and stability after experiencing an unsafe living situation with their mother; assisting a Spanish-speaking mother with language access barriers to gain sole custody of her children who had experienced abuse from their other parent; and fighting for a father to regain visitation rights after the mother barred him from seeing his minor child who had recently become paralyzed.

2023 Family Law Services



Without Access to Justice Initiative funding, parents and caregivers who cannot afford legal assistance risk losing the opportunity to advocate effectively for their children and families, or inadvertently waiving their rights, which can result in outcomes that separate and destabilize families. These situations can lead to devastating consequences for caregivers and children and send people deeper into poverty.

Provide Legal Information, Counseling, and Representation that Helped 2,855 Residents Defend against Eviction, Divert them from Court, and Preserve Affordable Housing

- The Pro Bono Center coordinated housing legal assistance through the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network (LTLAN), a partnership with 5 other organizations that provides central intake on the phone and online to connect tenants with legal help. **The network has assisted more than 10,330 residents since 2020.**
- LTLAN also provided holistic, non-legal services to divert tenants from court before an eviction case is filed. Specialists help tenants search for housing, complete rental assistance applications, recertify housing subsidies, and access social services.

2023 Housing Legal Services

- Access to Justice funding is essential to improving some of the District’s worst problems, such as lack of affordable housing and deplorable housing conditions that push predominantly Black, longtime residents out of D.C.

1,562
residents
received legal
advice,
information, or
representation

155
residents
placed with pro
bono counsel

2
Evictions,
Conditions,
and Tenants’
Right To
Organize
Trainings

2
Trainings for
other
organizations

Without Access to Justice funding for legal assistance, tenants are overwhelmingly more likely to be evicted. Evictions can lead to homelessness and spiral families further into poverty. Funding housing legal assistance reduces costs associated with evictions, such as emergency medical care and maintenance of homeless shelters.

In 2024, Access to Justice Initiative Funding Supports New Legal Services

In 2024, Initiative Funding will allow the Pro Bono Center to expand with several new initiatives to meet the needs of low-income residents. These initiatives include:

- A **Future Planning & Probate Program** to help residents complete probate petitions and execute vital estate planning documents, including but not limited to, advance directives, wills, and powers of attorney. This program aims to empower D.C. residents to maintain control over their lives and assets as they age, become incapacitated, or pass away.
- A **contract social worker** to provide non-legal support for issues that are often tied to and may impact the outcome of residents’ legal cases, such as mental health, health care, childcare, financial support, and social services.
- A new **D.C. Public Libraries & Pro Bono Center partnership** to provide critical Know Your Rights information sessions for residents in all 8 wards.

Access to Justice Initiative funding empowers residents and promotes racial justice by providing critical legal assistance to people historically marginalized due to systemic racism and economic inequality. This support enables members of our community to assert their rights, fosters empowerment, and addresses structural barriers to equality.

February 6, 2024

Dear Chairman Mendelson and Members of the Council of the District of Columbia,

I write today to express my sincere appreciation for your support of DC legal services through funding of the Access to Justice Initiative and to ask that you continue to do so this year. Funding the Initiative provides critical legal help to DC's low-income residents, ensuring they receive the legal rights and financial assistance to which they are entitled. This in turn results in a brighter future for our children and families so they do not just survive but thrive and fully participate in the DC community and economy. Moreover, you are saving the government money because legal services organizations help ensure benefits applications and court pleadings are completed correctly, thereby conserving agency staff time and effort.

DC KinCare Alliance was founded in 2017 to support the legal, financial, and related service needs of relative caregivers (predominantly grandmothers) who step up to raise DC children in their extended families in times of crisis when the children's parents are not able to care for them due to mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration, death, abuse and neglect, and deportation. Approximately 22,000 Black and brown DC children are living in kinship care arrangements, representing about 20% of all DC children of color. The majority of these children live at or near the poverty level, have experienced trauma, and are at grave risk for poor physical, emotional, and educational outcomes. Research shows that kinship care can be a powerful stabilizing force for these children, changing the trajectory of their lives for the better.

The specific needs we address—the inability to access legal rights, economic security, housing, food, financial opportunities, health care, and other supports and services—are those faced by all low-income, under-resourced communities of color, but are exacerbated for kinship families because they are not recognized by the systems that are supposed to help and support them. Our goal is to eliminate this unequal treatment by using a threefold approach: (1) providing direct legal representation of caregivers; (2) furnishing information and education about legal rights and benefits; and (3) using advocacy and impact litigation to break down systemic barriers.

DC KinCare Alliance is the only organization in DC focused solely on serving relative caregivers raising DC's at-risk children. Our accomplishments over the 6 years since our founding include: providing legal services to more than 800 relative caregivers raising more than 1,000 at-risk DC children in over 1,000 legal matters; establishing a free legal helpline and court walk-in clinic; and distributing more than 2,000 copies of our DC Relative Caregiver Legal Resource Guide.

Funding from the Access to Justice Initiative, which accounts for about half of our operating budget, has made these accomplishments possible. The demand for our services has grown every year since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Initiative has helped us to increase and expand our services to those most in need in our community.

Sincerely,
Marla Spindel
Executive Director

DC VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT

A voice for victims and children in the DC metro area since 2008

5335 WISCONSIN AVENUE NW, STE. 440 | WASHINGTON, DC 20015
Tel. (202) 885-5542 | Fax (202) 885-5529 | www.dcvlp.org

My name is Sara Tennen and I am the Executive Director of DC Volunteer Lawyers Project (DCVLP). I would like to thank the Mayor and the D.C. Council for their continued investment in civil legal services for low-income victims in Washington, D.C. Thanks to this investment, in 2023, we served the largest number of D.C. residents in our organization's history: nearly 3,000 low-income victims, children, and community members. I would like to share with you why the funding to support the Access to Justice Initiative is so critical. We offer these views from our perspective as a legal services organization with over 15 years of experience on the front lines helping victims in the city achieve safety and stability.

At DC Volunteer Lawyers Project, we believe that a life free of violence and abuse is a basic human right. Our mission is to advocate for domestic violence victims, at-risk children, and other vulnerable individuals through comprehensive pro bono legal services; to empower victims with knowledge, resources and on-going support; and to broaden our impact by engaging, training, and supporting a strong and diverse network of volunteer lawyers and community volunteers.

We could not do this work without the tremendous support of Access to Justice funding.

At DCVLP, we receive ATJ funding through the DC Bar Foundation to support our Domestic Violence Program, our Child Advocacy Program, and our Immigration Program. This year, the equivalent of over seven full-time attorneys are funded through the Initiative across three programs, or approximately a third of our D.C.-based attorneys. These attorneys handle cases for representation, provide legal advice and brief services at our clinics, and supervise pro bono attorneys. We leverage ATJ funding to support our volunteer model, where we mobilize 600 volunteers donating nearly 48,000 hours worth \$18 million in free legal services annually. Without ATJ funding to support these staff positions, hundreds if not thousands of low-income victims and their children would be unable to access legal services.

ATJ funding is critical to increasing access to services for some of the District's most vulnerable victims. DCVLP first began offering free, walk-in legal clinics in 2013 with one community-based clinic. Since then, our clinics have grown into an integrated network of 10 access points across the District, including court-based, community, medical-legal partnerships, and remote clinics. These clinics are consistently busy. Last year, we provided 1,200 free legal consultations – double the number we provided in 2022. More access points make it easier for low-income District residents, especially those from underserved communities, to reach services. We are only able to maintain all of these in person and virtual access points because of the support we receive from the DC Bar Foundation and OVSJG.

DC VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT

A voice for victims and children in the DC metro area since 2008

5335 WISCONSIN AVENUE NW, STE. 440 | WASHINGTON, DC 20015

Tel. (202) 885-5542 | Fax (202) 885-5529 | www.dcvlp.org

Complex, lengthy cases are consistently becoming our norm, and funding from ATJ is critical to helping us provide comprehensive services to low-income victims. It is taking more resources to serve the same number of victims compared to just a few years ago. In our DV program, our largest practice area, victims face court backlogs, waitlists for supervised visitation, home studies, and mental health evaluations, and challenges serving respondents and obtaining police evidence, each of which prolongs the resolution of their case and requires more staff resources. Civil protection orders are taking twice as long and family law cases are taking three times as long to resolve as pre-pandemic. For our immigration clients, USCIS delays continue to increase and are not anticipated to improve anytime soon. In our Child Advocacy Program, where we serve as court-appointed guardians ad litem for vulnerable children living with abuse and other dangerous circumstance, Judges are requesting our attorneys in increasingly complex cases that require in-depth investigations. Combined with ongoing court delays, the result is that cases are on average taking about two and a half times to resolve as pre-pandemic.

There are considerable implications for these challenges. Our clients are struggling and navigating the trauma of a court process for longer, especially because the cases are not sitting quietly – there are often more violations. We provide each client with services throughout the duration of their case. Longer case times impact our capacity to take new cases, significant at a time when more people need our help.

ATJ funding is essential to our ability to keep pace with increased demand. In 2023, in part thanks to ATJ funding, we handled 764 cases on behalf of low-income victims of domestic violence, vulnerable immigrants, and at-risk children and we are on track to take even more cases in 2024. Our services can be life-changing for victims, yet in all of our practice areas, we cannot assist every victim who seeks representation due to limited capacity.

Also of note, many of our attorneys receive support from the Loan Repayment Assistance Program through the DC Bar Foundation to cover their law school loans. This program is critical to our ability to continue to recruit and retain a diverse group of highly qualified attorneys to provide representation to victims.

District residents without access to legal representation are missing a critical tool in being able to have a pathway to safety, stability, and long-term self-sufficiency. It is critical that civil legal services receive adequate funding. I would like to thank Mayor Bowser and City Council for their commitment to civil legal services here in DC.



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

HEALTH JUSTICE ALLIANCE

Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative funds are critical to the Georgetown University Health Justice Alliance's (HJA) Perinatal Legal Assistance & Wellbeing (P-LAW) Project and Cancer Legal Assistance & Wellbeing (C-LAW) Project. These medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) provide no-cost legal services to vulnerable low-income DC residents receiving care at MedStar Washington Hospital Center's Division of Women's and Infants' Services (WIS) and at MedStar Georgetown Cancer Center.

Both MLPs address critical health issues in our community. Black babies born in the District are over 450% more likely to die than White babies in their first year of life (DC Health 2018). According to the [D.C. Department of Health's Cancer Control Plan for 2022-2026](#), cancer is the second leading cause of death in the District and disproportionately harms Black residents who frequently present with later-stage disease. The [D.C. Cancer Registry](#) reports that Black women, for example, die from breast cancer at over twice the rate of White women. And as summarized in [Health Disparities in the Black Community: An Imperative for Racial Equity in the District of Columbia](#) (Dr. Christopher King) the age-adjusted death rate for colorectal cancer in Black residents is three times higher than White residents.

HJA's healthcare partners serve primarily DC residents of color who live in Wards 5, 7 & 8, are covered by Medicaid or Medicare, and face a constellation of health harming legal needs. Events like a lost job or reduced hours at work may lead to financial instability, which in a city facing a lack of affordable housing can quickly devolve into eviction, food insecurity, and other crises that interfere with a patient's ability to access care.

HJA's preventive and holistic lawyering approach uses the law as a tool to improve health for patients in the District. Since 2022, ATJ funds have allowed HJA to serve more than 250 clients on a total of 430 legal issues in the areas of employment, housing, public benefits, social security, and estate planning.

ATJ funds support HJA's efforts to ensure continuity of health care for clients. Recently, when a client received a notice stating his Medicaid was being terminated the next day, C-LAW attorneys immediately filed an appeal asserting his right to "aid paid pending," which allowed him to remain insured and attend his chemotherapy appointment the following week. With his temporary insurance in place, C-LAW was able to connect with both D.C. Health Care Finance and D.C. Health Benefit Exchange to resolve the matter without a hearing.

ATJ funds also support our capacity to help clients successfully apply for benefit programs, such as Social Security Disability and DC Paid Family Leave, and to troubleshoot any barriers that arise—avoiding the need for agency appeals and delayed receipt of critical income supports. This is a



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

HEALTH JUSTICE ALLIANCE

service very few District agencies have the resources to provide. For example, P-LAW recently identified an administrative error resulting in a postpartum single mother's SNAP and TANF initial benefits award being too low. P-LAW worked with the D.C. Department of Human Services to expedite the review of her claim, resulting in over \$20,000 in economic benefits that allowed the client to focus on her own recovery and bond with her newborn without the looming threat of food and housing insecurity.

In calendar year 2024, ATJ funds have enabled C-LAW to secure more than \$160,000 in disability income for patients. In 2022 and 2023, ATJ funds allowed P-LAW to secure almost \$300,000 for patients in public benefits, paid leave, and housing supports.

Without continued ATJ funds, our capacity to provide legal services to low-income, vulnerable patients will be severely reduced. We would need to reduce staffing by 50% during a period when we anticipate legal needs to increase. In April 2023, federal protections enacted during the pandemic to allow Medicaid recipients to passively renew their coverage ended. Now, all Medicaid recipients in DC must start renewing their coverage annually. Clients are facing improperly terminated Medicaid, even when they have correctly and timely completed the renewal process. In addition, soaring rents and high inflation rates mean many clients are falling behind on rent; changes to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program as well as high demand for funds, have made it nearly impossible to obtain enough rental assistance and other support to cover housing costs. Last, as contractor and labor costs continue to increase, cases where landlords fail to provide safe, habitable housing in compliance with DC Code are growing. Thus, we anticipate that legal screening by our medical partners will continue to uncover an increased number of patients with unmet legal needs. The reduction in legal services associated with any decrease in ATJ funding will have a ripple effect and result in capacity shortages for years to come.



Excellence in Truth and Service

School of Law
Clinical Law Center

April 11, 2024

To Whom It May Concern:

The Howard University School of Law has been grateful for consistent funding through the Access to Justice program for our Fair Housing Clinic. With this funding, Howard has increased the number of clients that our Fair Housing Clinic serves and broadened the types of cases we take. Just as importantly, with ATJ funding, we have increased the number of law students in the Fair Housing Clinic, meaning that, each year, we produce more graduates, most of whom are Black and/or Latino, who help diversify the field of tenant advocates and public interest lawyers in DC.

Elimination of this funding would cause a significant reduction in the number of clients that Howard's Fair Housing Clinic can serve, putting more DC residents at risk for displacement, homelessness and instability. It would also hamper our efforts to train mostly Black and/or Latino law students who, upon graduation, often go on to work in local legal services organizations, many of which have issued similar pleas to preserve this critical source of funding.

The ATJ funds have allowed Howard to expand the breadth and depth of our work, in the following ways:

- **More Eviction Defense Work.** With ATJ funding, Howard hired an additional supervising attorney with deep expertise in eviction defense and eviction prevention work. We have greatly increased our capacity to provide full representation (as opposed to brief services) to tenants who otherwise would not have access to legal services. Often, what stands between DC residents and homelessness is a legal advocate; with ATJ funding Howard's clinic has prevented many wrongful evictions, allowing families to remain in place, ensuring that children to stay in their schools and preventing unnecessary instability and costs. Through our more robust eviction defense practice, our clinic has also been able to affirmatively champion tenants' rights to safe, habitable, and affordable housing above and beyond the mere prevention of displacement and has worked with community organizations and law firms to provide necessary representation for tenants involved in collaborative efforts to preserve safe and affordable housing communities.
- **More Culturally and Racially Competent Lawyering.** The Fair Housing Clinic integrates racial equity practices in all of its work. Student attorneys are trained to examine biases and how they may affect the way we investigate, negotiate, and litigate on behalf of clients; we focus on creating career-long commitments to racial equity practices, and our graduates often report that their clinic experiences made them more culturally competent attorneys. Further, the vast majority of our student attorneys are Black and/or Latino, and graduates of our clinic are well positioned to help diversify the field of tenant advocates and public interest lawyers in DC. Without ATJ funding, Howard will send fewer Fair Housing Clinic graduates into the workforce, reducing the opportunities for other legal services organizations to diversify their legal staffs. A loss of diversity would have a direct negative impact on outcomes for clients.



- **Increased Education and Outreach.** With ATJ funding, Howard has greatly increased its education and outreach efforts. We conduct frequent trainings and educational events in community centers, churches and other locations across DC, often centering our events in areas that have the least access to legal services. A decrease in ATJ funding will severely limit our ability to do this important and empowering work.
- **More Housing Code Violation Matters.** With ATJ funding, Howard has taken on more Housing Code violation matters in which we represent tenants who live in units that are impacted by severe Housing Code violations such as lack of heat, collapsed ceilings, peeling lead paint, severe mold, and inadequate weather proofing. Howard's representation improves not just the conditions of housing, but also health outcomes for entire families. Often, when we sue landlords to force compliance with the Housing Code for tenants in one unit, the Landlord is required to make improvements to common areas and building infrastructure, which benefits tenants in all units.
- **More Systemic Cases.** With ATJ funding, Howard's Fair Housing Clinic has taken on more systemic cases in which we make a difference not just for one client but often for tenants in entire buildings or neighborhoods. ATJ funding has allowed our clinic to take on more cases enforcing compliance with the District's rent stabilization laws, which can often result in longer-lasting affordability that impacts future tenants long after our representation concludes.
- **Increased Language Access.** ATJ funding has allowed us to hire a bilingual supervising attorney who has greatly increased our capacity to serve Spanish-speaking clients.
- **Increased Coordination with Partner Organizations.** ATJ funding has provided Howard with the resources necessary to better coordinate with other legal services organizations, to ensure that, collectively, we knock down barriers to legal representation for DC residents.
- **Increased Stability for Families with Children.** The majority of Howard's clients are families with children. Often legal representation is what stands between these children and displacement from their home, school and community. When families are displaced, the costs are high not only for the family but for our city as a whole.

Cutting funding for legal services organizations would be devastating for DC's most vulnerable residents, many of whom can only access legal representation by organizations who rely on ATJ funding. For these reasons, I urge the City Council to reconsider its funding priorities.

Sincerely,

Valerie Schneider



HOWARD
UNIVERSITY

Excellence in Truth and Service

School of Law
Clinical Law Center

Professor of Law
Director, Clinical Law Center
Howard University School of Law
2900 Van Ness Street NW
Washington DC 20008



www.legalaiddc.org
1331 H Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-1161

April 1, 2024

**Submission to the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety**

Legal Aid DC urges the Council to recommit fully to funding critical legal services for District residents. Any cuts to Access to Justice funding would be devastating for District residents who need help preventing unlawful evictions, challenging erroneous denials of food support, fleeing domestic violence with their children, and staving off illegal debt collection practices.

As the largest grantee for Access to Justice funding, this support provides salary for more than 35 lawyers and professionals – about one third of our employees. Were funding to be cut significantly, Legal Aid DC would be unable to continue providing many critical services to the District residents who rely on our advocacy.

If Legal Aid DC were forced to reduce services, it would coincide with a dramatic increase in requests for legal assistance:

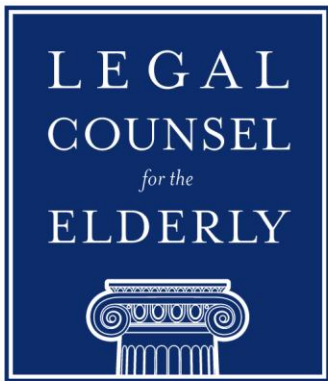
- The highest number of applicants for assistance and accepted clients in a decade through the first two months of 2024. Current funding levels have enabled us to conduct initial meetings with 56% more residents in the first two months of 2024 versus 2023 and to accept 81% more cases in those two months compared to the same time in 2023;
- A 45% increase in January 2024, compared to the prior year, in requests for help with housing-related legal services;
- Doubling in requests for help with SNAP and debt collection since 2022;
- Skyrocketing applications for representation, compared to 2023, at both the Family Law Assistance Project (FLAN) and Landlord Tenant Assistance Network (LTLAN), as well as through Legal Aid's online intake program and Big Chair office in Anacostia.

Access to Justice Funding supports Legal Aid attorneys who are engaged in meaningful litigation to protect vulnerable members of the community. These include:

- At the DVIC-NW, Access to Justice funds will enable Legal Aid staff members to represent domestic violence survivors in more than 250 cases, securing Civil Protection Orders, temporary custody, and financial support.
- Access to Justice funding will support Legal Aid's housing team in representing more than 400 individuals and families in eviction defense cases by challenging the merits of a claim for

eviction, securing much needed housing repairs, or negotiating agreements favorable to tenants to protect their rights and resources and minimize the disruptiveness of moving.

The Council must act to preserve Access to Justice funding. The District's most vulnerable residents rely on the legal services made possible by ATJ funding, and a decrease in such funding could have catastrophic consequences for members of our community. Legal services attorneys are in court and before administrative agencies every day helping our clients navigate complex legal and bureaucratic systems. The Council should not leave thousands of DC residents without the legal support that could mean the difference between success or failure in maintaining housing, securing custody of their children, and getting health care.



March 29, 2024

Legal Counsel for the Elderly (“LCE”) champions the dignity and rights of Washington, D.C. elders by providing free legal and social work services to those in need. The Access to Justice (“ATJ”) Initiative provides critical funds for our efforts to help residents 60-plus stay in their homes, improve their financial security, and plan for their futures. Cuts to ATJ funding will put these services at risk, while maintaining the \$31.7 million for ATJ will promote the financial growth and stability of many District seniors.

601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049

202-434-2120

202-434-6464 fax

lce@aarp.org

aarp.org/lce

Thanks to the ATJ funds, LCE has continued the expansion of legal services to help seniors recover from the pandemic and stay in their communities. Although many District residents have seen prosperity with the end of the pandemic, seniors still need legal representation to secure benefits and services to protect their health and assets.

LCE witnesses the impact of ATJ funds daily with the number of cases for the Elderly and Persons with Physical Disabilities Waiver (“EPD”). LCE is seeing an increase in EPD waiver recipients whose personal care hours are under threat. Maintaining Fiscal Year 2024 (“FY 24”) funding safeguards LCE’s ability to represent EPD clients before the Office of Administrative Hearings to secure or preserve personal care aide hours. Personal care hours keep clients from having to enter costly long-term care facilities. For example, between January and March 2023, LCE opened 19 EPD waiver cases compared to the same three months in 2024 when LCE opened 32 cases. The number of EPD Waiver cases nearly doubled and LCE expects this trend to continue. ATJ funds will be important for LCE to meet this increased demand.

In a similar trend, requests for legal services from homebound individuals also nearly doubled during January to March of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. In 2023, LCE opened 24 cases for homebound clients; in 2024, LCE opened 44 cases for homebound clients. The senior population in DC is growing and expected to reach 24.4 percent by 2030, with 16.1 percent of those older than 65 living below the federal poverty level.¹ ATJ funding will help LCE continue to meet the legal needs of homebound seniors.

ATJ funds, also helped LCE tenant advocacy grow by 67 percent and helped LCE increase the number of evictions prevented by 100 percent between 2022 and 2023. Furthermore, LCE added additional tenant supports including assistance applying for public benefits and conducting housing searches. LCE also cemented partnerships with community-based organizations to implement innovative projects, like Participatory Defense Hubs, a program to educate tenants

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Poverty by Age: 2022* <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-age/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D> Accessed March 26 at 1:27PM.

about their rights. ATJ funds will help LCE expand these efforts further, and ultimately lead to greater housing stability for seniors in DC.

Cutting funding for this work would have a devastating impact. As many of our older neighbors are still reeling from the financial, material, and physical impacts of the pandemic, cutting legal advocacy will exacerbate the unjust burden they carry.

With continued ATJ and CLCPP funding, LCE will be able to continue the important work of serving D.C.'s most vulnerable residents. LCE recommends maintaining ATJ funds at its current level.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rhonda Cunningham Holmes". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Rhonda Cunningham Holmes
Executive Director
Legal Counsel for the Elderly



Mother's Outreach Network

Mother's Outreach Network (MON) is a legal services and advocacy organization that *advances* the inclusion and empowerment of Black mothers in the struggle for family preservation by transforming government income and child welfare laws, policies and practices *from punitive to empowering*. We do so, in relevant part, through our legal programs, which undergird and provide women identifying as mothers and their families with life changing legal services. This informs our advocacy, organizing and systems change for broader policy transformation.

While MON's strategies are multidisciplinary, our goals are simple: to help Black families find stable footing economically and to keep as many families together as long as possible. To this end, MON's niche practice areas in advocacy and legal services seek to make an impact on the large footprint of poverty in DC. MON pushes to fill a crucial otherwise unmet legal need on issues that impact marginalized impoverished DC residents, 10% of the city's population. Additionally, the legal work multiplies other efforts: Clients in our legal program become galvanized as change-makers, whether after attending our know-your-rights legal information sessions or receiving representation. Our efforts fall into two broad categories that mirror our organization-wide focus:

- Our family defense legal program supports mothers in pursuing economic stability while navigating the child welfare system: by providing brief advice, counsel, and representation to mothers in matters at the investigation and pre-petition stage of a child welfare matter through low-income tax advice and workshops, public benefits assistance, and in expunging their name from the child protection register.
- Second, Mother's Outreach Network provides niche tax advice legal services and does so 1) on a year-round basis and 2) in brief advice format: customized to the needs of marginalized DC residents that are often cautious and hesitant to address their tax issues. Clients leave MON's clinic confident they can tackle their tax matters, and some walk away surprised they are likely owed refunds rather than owing them. MON's tax legal work aims to chip away at the information and participation gaps, as 25% of DC residents are not claiming their federal or increasingly generous local Earned Income Tax Credits. With ATJ support, MON's clinic has helped several dozen DC residents on a better path with their tax issues.

A smaller ATJ-funded program, Mother's Outreach Network lands an outsize impact that touches a portion of the population impacted by the child welfare system, many of them due to poverty-factors.

- Mother's Outreach Network advises parents on wrongful placement on the Child Protection Register, a barrier to employment, work which only one other provider in DC specializes.
- If a parent comes to MON with housing insecurity or housing code violations, MON works with them to advocate for improved conditions or housing vouchers, and thereby wards off allegations of neglect.
- In the last year, MON has served 150 service recipients through direct legal aid representation and legal education services and engaged 350 constituents in advocacy efforts.
- Without our work in this niche area spreading awareness through dozens of community canvases and pop up legal clinics over the past year touching hundreds of individuals, many would not be served.
- Our most recent victory has been helping our client obtain a birth certificate for her child who was born at home and had been denied a birth certificate from DC Vital Records, as featured in the Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/03/05/dc-court-hearing-undocumented-baby-home-birth-certificate/>

Finally, and noteworthy, our work is in tackling issues that the ABA has called attention to. In August 2022, the American Bar Association (ABA) adopted **Resolution 606**, which calls on all legal professionals to recognize how over-surveillance of and underinvestment in Black families has shaped the child welfare field for centuries with the prevalence of involvement of families in the child welfare system and the destabilization caused by poverty. The resolution highlights that there is a need for vigorous representation of parents. The disproportionate impact on Black families, gives this greater urgency. This has only strengthened over time.

MON's legal program work thereby prevents and mitigates factors that could lead to involvement in the child welfare system.



April 5, 2024

Chairperson Brooke Pinto and D.C. Councilmembers
City Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Chairperson Pinto and Members of the D.C. Council:

I write to you on behalf of Neighborhood Legal Services Program of the District of Columbia (NLSP). I welcome the opportunity to share with you the impact that the Access to Justice Initiative has had on the legal services provided to underserved populations in the District of Columbia.

NLSP pioneered the neighborhood based legal services office model sixty years ago. As we celebrate this significant anniversary, it is important to note that even today NLSP continues to be an integral part of the communities that we serve, representing low income, underrepresented and underserved citizens of the District of Columbia (DC). Our services facilitate self-sufficiency and give voice to the voiceless, while leveling the playing field in the civil legal services arena. The work of NLSP would not have been possible without funding through the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ).

Many of NLSP's clients confront the quagmire of the legal system with fear and trepidation. Those opponents whom they face in court or administrative hearings are more likely to be represented by counsel or are generally comfortable and savvy in these venues. The work that is done at NLSP doesn't make newsstands; the stories that are told are heart wrenching; and the salaries earned by NLSP staff are extremely modest even in comparison to others engaged in this work. Yet, the work that is done through NLSP is priceless. The tenacious warriors of Neighborhood Legal Services Program tackle the challenges of underserved, impoverished residents of DC, armed with knowledge, fortitude, and bolstered by sheer grit and determination.

The Access to Justice Initiative makes this work possible. The Council, with a large measure of foresight has invested in the future of DC residents and leveled the playing field by funding Access to Justice Initiatives at higher, more meaningful levels over the last few years. You have wisely recognized that these funds support the provision of vital, life-altering civil legal services which impact the overall well-being of the District's citizens that you serve. This Council must also realize that loss of housing, public benefits, and family stability serves no useful purpose. Likewise, massive homelessness, unspeakable hunger, family division and foster care are far more costly and devastating than ensuring that people have the legal protections necessary to remain or become contributing members of society.

NLSP's approach to the provision of legal services is intended to reach broad populations of DC residents. Not unlike an emergency room, the first point of contact for potential clients is

NLSP's Brief Services Unit (BSU). BSU provides basic "triage" for incoming cases. The attorneys in this unit can help whether the client is assisted with counsel and advice or other brief services in a broad variety of civil legal matters. It is amazing to see the positive results of merely assisting someone to navigate the legal system. If, however, the client requires more than the BSU can provide, the client is referred to one of our three extended services practices for further assistance. ATJ funding enhances NLSP's ability to provide critical legal services for the communities that we serve. Through this funding the staff are able to continuously address the ever-expanding, disparate impact of systemic inequality that our clients face and withstand daily.

The NLSP Family Law Practice is armed with relentless attorneys and support staff who recognize the value of the family unit. Protecting people who have been victims of domestic violence to secure legal protections facilitates the rebuilding of self-worth, trust, and confidence. Likewise, acquiring custody and support, establishing healthy visitation schedules, being encouraged to mediate and co-parent promotes healthier families. Access to Justice funding allows families, who seek legal advice or extended representation from NLSP's Family Law Practice, the opportunity to be empowered and to have a fair and equitable posture in court settings against represented adverse parties. This funding helps keep families together and provides them with the legal guidance they would not be able to obtain otherwise. It gives families hope, a sense of peace, and confidence knowing that they are being represented by an attorney who is invested in obtaining a favorable outcome on their behalf. Access to Justice funding helps to provide an even keel for families that seek our assistance.

NLSP's Economic Security Unit (ESU) is comprised of the intersectional work of several practice areas that all contribute to gaining, maintaining, and protecting our clients' vital income sources. For the working poor, individuals living in poverty, and those on the brink of homelessness, any lapse in fixed-income, employment, or public benefits has an immediate effect on their ability to survive. The attorneys and staff in the ESU seek to increase the financial autonomy of our clients and create pathways out of poverty by eliminating barriers to employment, protecting low-income consumers, and gaining and maintaining access to public benefits. ATJ funding supports ESU and ensures effective advocacy for economic stability – addressing unfair and deceptive practices by unscrupulous businesses, defending clients from illegal debt collection, ensuring clients' credit and identity and that public information is accurate and protected, as well as ensuring that clients have access to public benefits that support a minimum standard of living for them and their families. ATJ support allows us to address the discrimination that returning citizens face when seeking housing and employment and ensures that our clients are able to fully participate in society once their criminal justice involvement is done. With ATJ funding, we are able to address the root causes of poverty to help our clients keep their limited funds in their pockets while obtaining any resources, to which they are entitled, to keep them on a path to economic uplift.

The attorneys and staff in the NLSP Housing Law Practice recognize the relationship between safe, decent, and affordable housing and personal well-being. NLSP's housing practice tackles a variety of civil legal issues on behalf of District residents, whether it is securing affordable housing or abatement of dangerous housing conditions. The funding received through the Access to Justice Initiative helps to keep DC residents in their homes. These funds help to ensure that landlords are accountable for maintaining units in livable conditions and keeps

tenants safe. ATJ funding is at the core of NLSP's housing work. This funding allows NLSP to staff the LTLAN, a coordinated intake hotline for low-income tenants facing eviction in DC, and to serve hundreds of tenants. NLSP attorneys have successfully obtained dismissals, settlements, and victories at trial that protect clients' basic right to shelter. Stabilizing funding allows us to enforce tenants' rights to safe, decent, and affordable housing and their right to be free of discrimination. Through this funding NLSP's attorneys intervene to preserve affordable housing and obtain much needed repairs to distressed buildings. Additionally, NLSP's source-of-income discrimination practice, and other anti-discrimination work, allows tenants to find housing across DC regardless of their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or subsidy status.

When advised of the proposed budget cuts, we felt it important to provide this Council with an example of the benefit experienced by a DC family because of Access to Justice Initiative funds.

Ms. H contacted NLSP after being sued for nonpayment of rent. She had been withholding her rent because of serious health and safety concerns following water intrusion into the unit. The walls had been replaced twice in the last six years after visible mold took over her bedroom and one of the bathrooms. Her children have allergies and asthma, and these conditions were detrimental to their health. At the time that she contacted NLSP, she reported that water was coming down the walls of her home when it rained. Sometime later, a tree fell on the house, causing more severe damage. Ms. H enrolled in a DC homeownership assistance program. Her goal was to get the necessary repairs completed so that she and her family could have safe housing until she was able to purchase her own home and move. We entered our appearance in the case, and zealously represented Ms. H. Her back rent was waived as an abatement for the deplorable conditions. Ms. H and her family completed the homeownership assistance program. The money that she saved in escrow facilitated their move to a home of their own. Ms. H has a fresh start, as a taxpaying homeowner, without the worry of an eviction case on her record.

In closing, funding for the Access to Justice Initiative is critical to maintaining the successes realized over the last few years and essential to the mission of NLSP. We implore you to continue this vital funding. In austere times the brunt of balancing the budget should not lie with those who can least afford it. Through a combination of ATJ funding, legislative and policy supports, resource developments, and with the assistance of pro bono volunteers, we are certain that our collective goal of providing access to justice for all residents of the District of Columbia can be achieved.

Sincerely,



Karen A. Newton Cole
Executive Director

February 14, 2024

Dear Chairman Mendelson and Members of the Council of the District of Columbia,

As the Legal Director of Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities, I write to support continued funding of the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ). Quality Trust is a DC-based nonprofit that operates the Jenny Hatch Justice Project (JHJP). Funded through the DC Bar Foundation's Access to Justice Initiative, JHJP helps people access alternatives to guardianship, including supported decision-making, so that they can maintain the maximum degree of autonomy possible. We provide community education about alternatives to guardianship as well as direct legal representation and short-term advice.

ATJ funding supports roughly 57% of our legal department's personnel expenses. Our two staff attorneys work closely with clients, often over the course of several meetings, to discover individually tailored solutions that can help people meet their support needs and preserve their independence. Because our work is time intensive, without dedicated staff our ability to provide direct legal advocacy to DC residents would be significantly curtailed.

JHJP has had tremendous impact on the people we serve. We have been able to help young people aging out of the foster system create plans for continued support with finances, benefits and medical care. We have helped people escaping domestic violence to maintain access to benefits that had previously been managed – and in some cases stolen – by their abusers. And we have helped people execute formal support agreements to avoid unnecessary guardianship.

Our services are needed across all Wards of the District. Last year, of those intake calls for which we currently have Ward information, 38% were from Wards 5, 7, and 8, with an additional 18% whose Ward is unknown or who had no permanent address. This is in line with historical trends. The vast majority of our clients with disabilities are multiply marginalized across race, disability, and income level, and most rely on SSI as their primary or sole source of income.

This past year we saw a significant influx of new cases including cases requiring extensive review of records and consultation with experts. Meanwhile, inflation significantly increased our staffing costs. If demand for legal services and costs both continue to rise, it is likely that we will need ATJ funding in 2025 more than ever.

We thank the Council for funding Access to Justice. For more information, please contact Sam Crane, Legal Director, at scrane@dcqualitytrust.org.

Sincerely,



Sam Crane



School Justice Project

Access to Justice Initiative Funding for School Justice Project (FY25)

School Justice Project (SJP) continues to rely on the critical funding provided by Access to Justice Initiatives Funds (ATJ Funds) to support all of our direct services work. SJP's education attorneys provide legal representation to low-income, court-involved students, ages 17-22, in the District with special education needs. ATJ Funds have been provided to SJP since 2015 and this year, in particular, the need for this funding has been felt by our office even more due to an increase in client referrals.

SJP is a DC-based legal services and advocacy organization that uses special education law to ensure that older, court-involved students with disabilities can access a quality education during periods of incarceration and throughout reentry. While SJP's program areas span across three areas including advocating for systemic changes to law and policy and providing community outreach and legal training, our focus has and always will be serving our clients through our direct representation program.

ATJ Funds allow our small non-profit to receive funding that we would not otherwise have access to in order to support the hiring of a small, but dedicated team of education attorneys to vindicate students' rights. Our attorneys are often the nucleus in a client's care coordination team, which may be comprised of a criminal defense attorney and school and court-related personnel. The SJP attorney's role is to dive deeper into the client's needs and their past educational experiences, and lack thereof, to determine additional supports to ensure the client has access to a quality education. With the assistance of an SJP attorney, a fuller picture of our clients' needs, and the significant challenges they have encountered in their educational and developmental processes, can be presented to the court. We know from our metrics, as well as our anecdotal experiences, that these contributions are essential to mitigating harsher sentencing outcomes for our clients.

As the landscape of juvenile and criminal justice continues to rapidly shift in the District leading to more referrals to the court of our young people, SJP's need for continued – and indeed, increased – ATJ Funds is even more imperative. We have seen an escalation this year of clients in need of education attorneys in both the Superior Court's Family Division as well as the Criminal Division. Unfortunately, there are not enough attorneys to meet the need, and specifically, there are not enough education attorneys who can provide legal representation in a criminal court context. SJP is the only stand-alone provider of free, legal services to court-involved students with disabilities in the District.

Without ATJ Funds, SJP would not be able to provide the high caliber of education legal representation to this vulnerable group of young people. SJP cannot stress how critical this funding source is to our work and to protecting the educational rights of the young people in our community and we strongly urge the continued funding of this program.



TZEDEK DC[®]

Legal Help for People in Debt

Board of Directors

Rebecca Azhdam, *Member*
Rahsaan Bernard, *Member*
A. Robert Bloom, *Treasurer*
Joshua Levy, *Member*
Robin Nunn, *Member*
Rachel Kronowitz, *Chair*
Willard Tom, *Member*
Ariel Levinson-Waldman, *Founding
President & Director-Counsel*
Peter Edelman, *Honorary Director*
Paul Berger, z"l, *Permanent Member*
Ronald Glancz, z"l, *Permanent Member*

Advisory Council

Anthony Alexis
Roy Austin, Jr.
Nicole Austin-Hillery
Claude Bailey
Allyson Baker
Michael Baratz
Vivian Bass
Mathew Bruckner
Barry Coburn
Stephen Danzansky
Daniel Edelman
Andrew Eskin
Rachel Feinstein
Marc Fleischaker
John Freedman
Shana Glickfield
Joan Greenbaum
Sally Greenberg
Andrew Herman
Mark Kahan
June Kress
Karen Ann Lash
Richard Lawch
Nancy Liebermann
Susan Liss
Stephen Marcus
Lorelie Masters
Carol Mates
Christopher McCannell
Dan Neustadt
Michael Nilsson
Kathryn Oberly
Ellen Oberwetter
BB Otero
Thorn Pozen
Harvey Reiter
Thomas Riesenberg
Seth Rosenthal
Robert Rozen
James Sandman
Nina Simon
John Sturc
Kenneth Trombly
Rebecca Vallas
Roger Zuckerman

On behalf of Ariel Levinson-Waldman, President and Director-Counsel

For the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

Re: Access to Justice Initiative Funding

Committee Chair Pinto, Members, and Committee Staff:

Tzedek DC is an independent public interest center headquartered at the UDC David A. Clarke School of Law, with a second office in Ward 8 which opened in 2023. Tzedek DC's mission is to safeguard the legal rights and financial health of DC residents with low incomes dealing with the often devastating consequences of abusive debt collection practices and other consumer related issues. Tzedek DC pursues this mission through an antiracist lens, as wealth in DC closely tracks racial lines. White DC households are estimated to have, on average, net assets of 81 times more than Black DC households, and 22 times more than Latino DC households. Further, while 43 percent of DC residents of color have a debt in collections, only 9 percent of white DC households do; unpaid debt reported to credit reporting agencies dramatically and disproportionately impacts residents of color, causing harm to their abilities to rent an apartment, secure a mortgage, get a loan, or even get a job. Tzedek DC relies on Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative funds from the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) to assist DC residents struggling with legal debt issues.

Access To Justice Initiative funds play a critical role in Tzedek DC serving our mission. With DC Bar Foundation grant support, Tzedek DC provides free legal help, pursues court rule and administrative agency reforms, and leads community outreach and education efforts. Tzedek DC serves DC households that are among the 300,000 residents living at or below 400% of the federal poverty line. In 2023, Tzedek DC held 78 community events, worked with 71 organizations, and reached over 15,000 community members. This includes monthly financial literacy classes at the Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood Library in Ward 5; bimonthly food distribution events with the Mayor's Office of Latino Affairs in Wards 4 and 7; and spreading information about our services and



resources throughout the District through 53 tabling events, including 29 in Wards 7 and 8. Tzedek DC held the first cohort of a new Young Adult Financial Empowerment Program at THEARC in Ward 8 in 2023, a groundbreaking 12-month pilot program to provide financial education workshops aimed at the specific needs of young adults—like budgeting, managing debt, understanding a paycheck, building credit, and investing.

In 2023, Tzedek DC provided the financial equivalency of an in-kind donation of \$2,144,390.98 worth of legal services through its partnership with 115 pro bono attorneys and 206 volunteers. Tzedek DC held four pro bono trainings, participated in a pro bono event at the DC Superior Court, and trained 126 new volunteers. The Access to Justice Initiative allows the DC Bar Foundation and OVSGJ grantees, including Tzedek DC and Legal Aid DC in collaboration with Catholic Charities Legal Network, DC Bar Pro Bono Center, Legal Counsel for the Elderly, and Neighborhood Legal Services Program, to offer and staff the debt collection defense hotline (202-851-3387). The hotline is provided to every resident sued in a debt collection case, most of whom are without counsel; similar networks exist for landlord-tenant and family law providers. The Access to Justice Initiative funding allows Tzedek DC to continue to provide a robust number of services and resources to District residents and continue to carry out our mission with the goal of addressing racial gaps in wealth, equality, and opportunity in the District.

The Access to Justice Initiative funds provide civil legal services to District residents, including those with consumer debt issues amidst historic inflation and a changing economic landscape. The funds allow Tzedek DC to provide services throughout the District, and we look forward to working with the Access to Justice Initiative to continue to make the District a more equitable place to live. We urge the Council in Fiscal Year 2025 to maintain Access to Justice Initiative funding at or above its current level at \$31.7 million.

Thank you for considering Tzedek DC's views.

FY2023-FY2024

In 2014, DC was chosen by U.S. DOJ's Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) as one of ten communities to participate in a demonstration project to create wraparound legal assistance networks. An initial needs assessment found that "the current issue is not that there is a lack of agencies that provide legal services to victims of crime; the issue is that these providers are setup in a disjointed patchwork across the DC area."

These challenges were echoed in The DC Access to Justice Commission's 2019 report, which states: "Individuals seeking legal services may find themselves making contact with several legal providers and undergoing multiple intake processes in various locations before securing assistance, or worse, learning that no assistance is available to them."

While VLNDC services are available to any victim of crime, the majority of clients come from underserved communities and many have community-specific barriers to accessing justice, such as the elderly, individuals who have limited English proficiency, who are undocumented, who are experiencing homelessness, and individuals with disabilities.

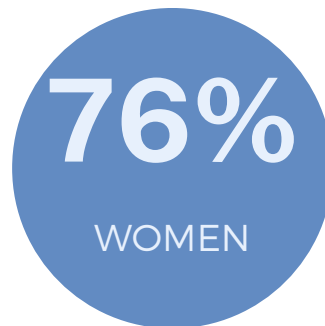
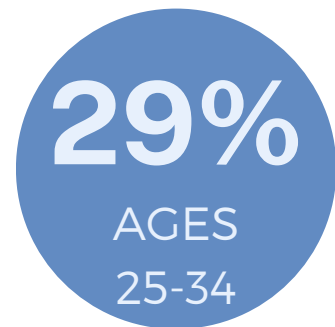
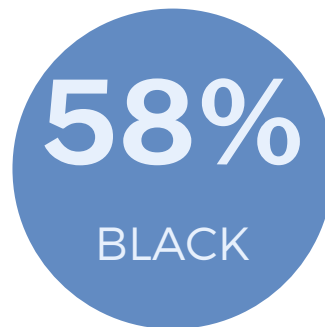
445 

Calls for Service in FY 2023

389 

New Clients in FY 2023

CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Access To Justice Funding

The Washington Lawyers' Committee receives funding through the Access to Justice program to support our work to address housing discrimination and segregation, assist low-wage workers, and to fight for the rights of prisoners and people with disabilities. Through these grants, we are able to assist thousands of low-income District residents. Despite the extraordinary commitment of the District to equal justice, the needs of low-income communities have not been fully met.

Among the cases and projects that the Committee pursued with Access to Justice funding are the following:

- The Committee operates a clinic for low-wage workers that serves hundreds of District residents each year. The clinic provides advice, brief services, and referrals on a broad range of legal issues, including wage theft, discrimination, and workplace safety.
- The Committee represents tenants who are coming together to collectively resolve disputes with their landlords. In 2023, the Committee brought its second case enforcing the District's right to organize statute. If that case goes to decision, it will be make new precedent under this law.
- To address housing conditions and preserve affordable housing, the Committee represents all of the tenants in litigation regarding disrepair and hazardous conditions at Meridian Heights, a building in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. The Committee also represents several tenants and the tenants' association at The Franklin, a building in Northeast D.C., where tenants confront similarly unsafe conditions. Other similar cases are currently in the investigation stage. The Committee is also litigating housing cases that address source of income discrimination and discrimination based on criminal records.
- In our disability work, at the end of last year we settled the *Charles H* case, which was brought under the IDEA to challenge the lack of education services provided by the District to incarcerated youth entitled to special education. Earlier this month, the Committee also filed a class action lawsuit against OSSE for its systemic failure to provide busing to special education students who are legally entitled to it. Together these matters will benefit hundreds of students in the District.
- During the height of the pandemic, the Committee secured and supported scores of pro bono lawyers who assisted District of Columbia prisoners to seek compassionate release.

March 29, 2024
DC Access to Justice Commission

Whitman-Walker Health's Legal Services Program relies on funding from the Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative to provide life-saving free legal services to residents of DC with a special focus on LGBTQ and HIV-positive persons who are living in poverty. We are home to 10 full-time legal professionals who focus on issues related to access to healthcare and health harming legal needs for low and no-income clients. Our work saves valuable city resources by meeting critical poverty-related needs of our clients.

ATJ supports improved health outcomes in Wards 7 and 8. Whitman-Walker's Max Robinson Center (MRC) legal office was established in Anacostia in 2007 thanks to ATJ and moved to Congress Heights in 2023; since that time, the volume of legal clients has grown exponentially from 139 in 2007, to nearly 700 cases in 2023 for clients living in Wards 7 and 8. By working in a closely-knit medical-legal partnership, staff attorneys coordinate in-person and immediate client assistance/problem-solving with nurses, doctors, therapists, medical case managers, and medical assistants to address health-harming legal needs. ATJ funds are critical to meeting the basic needs of residents East of the River.


- Our clients in Wards 7 & 8 can meet with a lawyer when they visit their doctor, therapist, or dentist - saving them time and money to resolve everyday life issues including the inaccessibility of electricity, affordable medication, Social Security income, safety at work, adequate housing, and reliable information to navigate these issues.
- Clients can stay in their home and community when home health aide services are obtained.
- Clients with a reliable Social Security income and SNAP benefits have economic security and can afford to pay their rent, buy food, and pay for transportation to medical appointments.

Whitman-Walker's legal services serve thousands of DC residents every year all over the city including a significant number of transgender clients; in fact, 20% of our legal client base identifies as transgender or nonbinary, and these clients face the daily impacts of harrasment, violence, and poverty. Our program connects these clients to life-saving services thanks to ATJ funds.

- Nearly 3,000 transgender clients have secured accurate identification thanks to our name and gender change clinic over the past 12 years. These efforts reduce violence while increasing access to employment, housing, and education.
- DC transgender residents rely on us to navigate workplace and public accommodations discrimination allowing them to access the services they need and to maintain employment.
- The demand for immigration services in DC continues to grow and ATJ funds enable us to provide competent legal representation to persons facing unspeakable violence in their home countries. Our work also connects these clients to employment and healthcare.

In all cases, our attorneys work diligently to manage client needs to avoid financial emergencies likely to result in eviction. As DC agencies charged with administering public benefits struggle to process timely and accurate applications, we fill the gap for DC residents by providing access to healthy choices and administrative justice. In the case of EPD Waiver program administration, clients end up living in unsafe conditions and often return to a hospital based on programmatic delays. The time and energy expended by already disabled or elderly residents leads to punitive and preventable health outcomes. Public benefits lawyers are critical to addressing these problems individually and systemically. ATJ funds make this life-saving work possible.

Respectfully submitted,



Amy E. Nelson (she/her)
Director of Legal Services