



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.

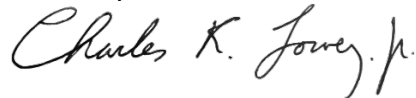
As Bar leaders, we continually encourage our D.C. Bar members to devote more time to pro bono work through volunteering with legal services organizations. But pro bono attorneys rely on the work of legal services providers in building trusting relationships with communities, screening cases, providing 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