

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

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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

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Wiley Rein LLP - Peter Shields, Managing Partner

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