



**Performance Oversight Hearing, D.C. Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants  
Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety**

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

**January 29, 2025**

Committee Chair Pinto and Members of the Committee, 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”).<sup>i</sup> 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 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.

It is my honor to testify today to discuss the impact of the Access to Justice Initiative (“Initiative”) which was created by the D.C. Council in fiscal year 2007 to provide public support to make civil legal services available to District residents. The Commission is extremely grateful to the Mayor and to the D.C. Council for their long-standing support of the Initiative and in particular to this Committee, which has championed it from the beginning – especially in years when the program faced significant cuts. The last three years (FY23, FY24, and FY25) mark historic investments in the program (\$31,689,347 in FY23; \$31,667,840 in both FY24 and FY25).

The Initiative is under the purview of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (“OVSJG”). OVSJG works with the DC Bar Foundation (“DCBF”), the organization that by statute has administered the program since its inception in fiscal year 2007. The Commission thanks the Foundation for its work in guiding the program’s development.

You will hear today from community leaders like the D.C. Bar and Washington Council of Lawyers, whose representatives will talk about the role the Initiative plays in our civil justice system. This will complement testimony you’ll hear from a few of the many grantee organizations and clients served by these organizations that will describe some of the concrete ways the Initiative advances community priorities like neighborhood and family stability, public safety and community well-being, and economic opportunity for individuals and the community. Witnesses from funded programs will give you a sense of the breadth of the Initiative’s impact and how it helps build stronger neighborhoods where District residents can live, thrive, and maintain a good life for themselves and their families. The Commission’s written testimony today is aimed at providing you with a broad overview of the Initiative and its work to complement that testimony.

The Initiative is a uniquely essential community resource, with no other program offering such a comprehensive strategy for addressing District residents’ legal needs. There is no right to appointed counsel in civil cases, unlike our criminal justice system. Yet, national and local data demonstrate that giving individuals greater access to legal information and opportunities for representation in civil cases leads to better individual and community outcomes. For thousands of District residents who cannot afford legal help, funding the Initiative and the work of its grantee programs offers a lifeline in keeping families housed, obtaining protection orders for victims of domestic violence, resolving conflict over child custody and child support, and so much more. The Initiative is a highly effective program with a long track record of success. It works.

The Initiative has three components.

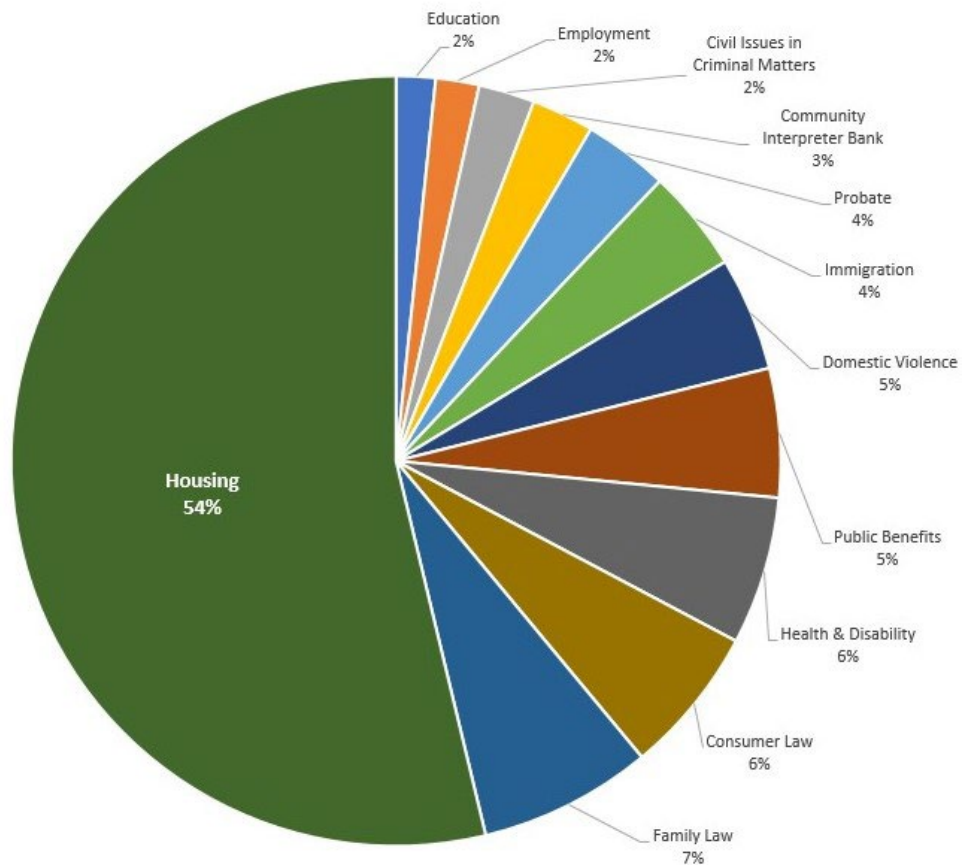
The first, the *Access to Justice Grants Program*, funds grants to nonprofit legal organizations whose staffs meet the growing demand for civil legal services in communities of highly concentrated poverty in a wide range of legal areas; promote language access through a community legal interpreter bank; and support DCBF’s efforts to improve legal services delivery, such as maintaining a coordinated intake and referral system to make it easier for residents to access legal services.

The second, the *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* or *CLCPP*, was created to specifically target funding towards access to legal help and representation in eviction-related proceedings.

The third, the *D.C. Poverty Lawyers Loan Repayment Program* or *LRAP*, assists grantee lawyers with student loan debt to ensure a high-quality, diverse pool of legal services professionals, serving as an important retention and recruitment tool for legal services employers.

*By the numbers*, 38,661 clients were served by the Initiative in FY23 and another 21,060 in the first half of FY24. Grantee organizations handled 13,534 cases in FY23 and another 8,348 in the first half of FY24. Clients served across both years were from all eight wards: Ward 8 (22%); Ward 7 (19%); Ward 6 (7%); Ward 5 (13%); Ward 4 (14%); Ward 3 (3%); Ward 2 (6%); Ward 1 (14%).<sup>ii</sup>

*What type of legal services are provided?* The Initiative funds organizations that provide legal help with a wide range of legal issues. In fiscal year 2024, the Initiative funding broke down by area was:



*What does this mean in practical terms?* Throughout FY24 and now in FY25, Initiative-funded staff at over 30 nonprofit organizations are in the community, across all eight Wards, helping D.C. residents face problems that, without resolution, can be devastating to them personally and to the health and vibrancy of District neighborhoods. These funded organizations:

- represent thousands of District residents in individual cases in a wide range of legal issues;
- operate courthouse-based programs that offer on-site help to litigants and partner with the court on other access to justice programs;
- staff recurring virtual and in-person clinics, some in partnership with vital community organizations like libraries, schools, and churches;
- partner with District agencies to advance common goals around housing, public safety, and economic opportunity;
- are embedded in District medical facilities helping victims of crime, children, and individuals with disabilities;
- host phone helplines to offer immediate legal information or advice;
- offer community education programs to inform District residents and the professionals that serve them about relevant legal issues;
- identify and promote large scale solutions to civil justice problems, including testimony and partnerships here at the Council;
- facilitate pro bono representation of low-income clients by law firm, government and in-house corporate attorneys through providing training, screening, mentoring, and other support for pro bono counsel; and
- promote the administration of justice and efficiency in the District's courts and tribunals.

Here are some highlights of these essential programs.

***Promoting neighborhood and family stability.***

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. 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, housing providers, other community leaders, and the District government. Efforts include those targeted at preserving intergenerational 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* provides more detail on the context and quality of this work, as will other testimony you'll hear today, but here are a few highlights:

- Through the *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program*, Initiative-funded organizations provide legal help and representation to individuals and families facing eviction in D.C. Courts and in other eviction-related proceedings. 13,156 cases have closed, and 10,646 tenants have been served since program data collection began in August 2019 through June 2024. Recent data shows that 76-81% of tenants facing eviction represented by funded organizations retained possession of their unit and 89-92% of those facing voucher terminations were able to retain them with legal help.
- Additional funding made available through the *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports other activities aimed at *preventing evictions and eviction filings from occurring*. In fiscal year 2023 and the first half of fiscal year 2024 there have been over 6,000 knocks on doors and over 9,400 outreach letters sent to those facing eviction. Funded staff help clients apply for rental assistance and public benefits, facilitate voucher transfers, work closely with emergency rental assistance providers to assist clients facing imminent eviction, and offer community training. Over the past year and a half, over 7,400 individuals have attended close to 460 community education sessions offered by funded organizations to help them maintain housing.
- The *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports other housing-related projects that keep people stably housed in affordable, healthy, safe, discrimination-free environments.

### ***Promoting Public Safety and Community Well-Being***

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* provides more detail on 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 and gender-based violence, sex trafficking, and exploitation;
- *specialized support for individuals with disabilities*, including ensuring safe and healthy environments and combatting discrimination;

- *assisting seniors aging in place* with estate and end-of-life planning, public benefits support, combatting fraud and abuse, and safekeeping intergenerational transfer of property;
- *promoting family stability* through early intervention legal services for children and families at risk of entering foster care, representation of parents and caregivers trying to resolve family conflict or child support issues, and specialized support for custody-involved children;
- *managing health crises* by helping District residents secure public benefits, gain access to housing, food, and medications, and identify legal remedies to health problems like asthma – often by providing specialized services through medical-legal partnerships with District health systems;
- *promoting education opportunities for youth* including legal support to students and parents to prevent school exclusion and ensure access to a free, appropriate education;
- *re-entry support for returning citizens to prevent recidivism and promote public safety* by helping them transition back to the community after incarceration and navigate legal challenges in education, custody, employment, consumer protection, and expungement; studies show that those who’ve had criminal records expunged are less likely to recidivate and more likely to receive higher future wages; and
- *supporting the District’s immigrant population* with legal help in combatting notario fraud, protecting unaccompanied minors, and offering culturally specific legal services to targeted populations within the immigrant community.

***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* provides more detail on 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- and moderate-income residents and protecting critically needed funds* by fighting predatory lending and illegal debt collection schemes and averting negative court judgments and credit reports, including focused efforts in Wards 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8;
- *protecting wages and jobs* by helping District residents recover stolen wages, fight discrimination and harassment, and seek assistance from employment-related organizations;

- *promoting economic security and lessening government burdens* by ensuring D.C. residents secure benefits for which they are entitled through advocacy and legal representation involving unemployment, TANF, SNAP, SSI, SSDI, rental subsidies, shelter services, and health benefits;
- *preserving intergenerational homes and wealth* through heirs property and probate-related work;
- *offering services to individuals experiencing homelessness* to gain access to housing, employment, and other benefits; and
- *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 D.C. residents who are limited English proficient or Deaf to access services from dozens of nonprofit legal services providers. This is imperative to promote equal access and procedural justice where significant percentages of Initiative clients have limited or no English proficiency.<sup>iii</sup> Providers describe the Bank as an “indispensable” partner in their outreach and community engagement efforts, especially enabling communication over Zoom using simultaneous interpretation. This requires training of the interpreters and the legal services providers. The Community Legal Interpreter Bank<sup>iv</sup> 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. Thirty-six organizations were served in FY23 and again in FY24.
- Interpretation services offered by professionals specially trained in legal language interpretation, with 7,569 telephone interpretations offered in FY23 and another 3,840 in the first half of FY24.
- Community education and other documents offered in multiple languages to promote client understanding, with 440 documents translated in FY23 and another 125 in the first half of FY24.

### ***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* provides more detail on pressing community needs, including:

- *the need for representation in civil cases in our courts and tribunals is great*, where those appearing in court *without* a lawyer are as high as 75-97%;

- *community needs are increasing*, with the largest provider of general legal services in D.C. reporting a 40% increase in client intakes across the organization in 2024 compared to the same period in 2023 (especially in housing and family law) and increases on-site at the courthouse (with 227% increase in housing requests and 69% in family law);
- *eviction remains at crisis level*, with evictions and calls for assistance on the rise;
- *domestic violence remains a chronic, growing area of need*, with grantee organizations and their partners seeing record number requests for help;
- *economic stressors persist*, with credit defaults (a predictor of debt collection volume) at a 14-year high;
- *family conflict often requires legal intervention*, with an increasing number of District families, in the thousands, seeking legal help – one organization reports serving 152% more people in 2024 than the prior year; and
- *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 complex legal processes alone.

***Retaining Highly Qualified, Experienced Lawyers to Serve District Residents***

The Initiative also helps legal services employers recruit and retain high-quality, experienced staff. The *D.C. Poverty Lawyer Loan Repayment Assistance Program* is a critical tool for maintaining a talented, enthusiastic, and diverse corps of legal services lawyers and currently enables 98 attorneys at 26 legal services organizations to devote their skills to helping District low-income residents. This is critical when legal services salaries in D.C. are currently significantly below-market (an average of \$73,378 among enrolled participants at all experience levels) compared with their government or private sector peers (with entry-level salaries for first-year associates at private law firms averaging at \$200,000<sup>v</sup>).

***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. Initiative funding to support this effort has been critical to its implementation.

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.<sup>vi</sup> 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 attorneys has doubled since program inception. This not only eases the transportation burden for low-income residents needing legal help, but it also has 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 highest-volume providers of primary medical care. Funded organizations have developed numerous partnerships with trusted community partners to deliver legal information and better connect District residents to legal services.

### ***Maximizing Other Resources***

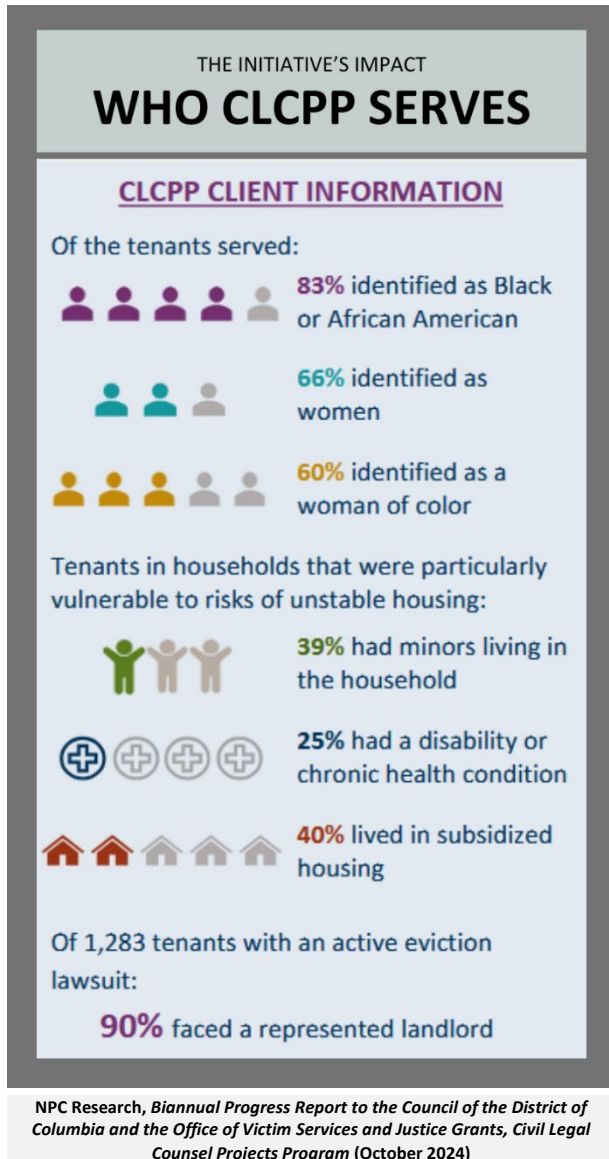
The District government's leadership in committing these public funds has also allowed legal services organizations to maximize a range of other resources. For example, legal services providers magnify the impact of every public dollar invested through the recruitment, training, and support of private 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.<sup>vii</sup> 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 and equal access for all is crucial, and its continued and increased funding for this work serves as a model to all segments of the community. 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.<sup>viii</sup> 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. Thank you for your support, and I'm so pleased that you'll be able to learn more today about the Initiative and its community impact.

## APPENDIX A: PROMOTING NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY STABILITY

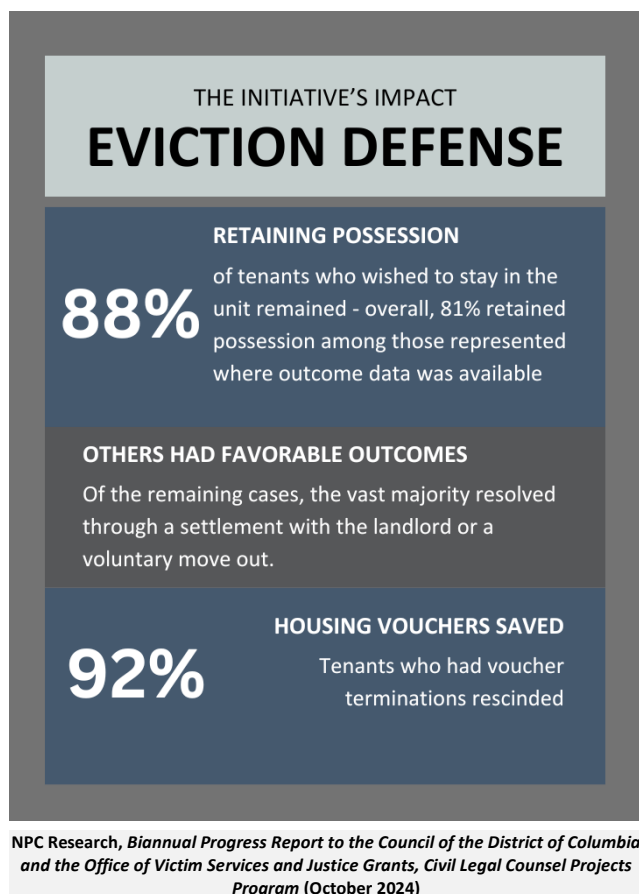
Initiative funds support a continuum of strategies that promote neighborhood and community stability by keeping District families safely housed. The *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* provides legal representation to individuals and families facing eviction matters in D.C. Courts and in other eviction-related proceedings; the *Access to Justice Grants Program* supports additional *prevention-based strategies* aimed at stopping eviction filings from occurring and supports other housing-related projects aimed at keeping District families in affordable, healthy, safe, and discrimination-free environments.



The need for continued support to preserve housing stability is as critical as ever. More than 81,000 District rental households are considered housing-cost burdened because they spend thirty percent or more of income on rent; 40,000 District rental households are “severely” housing-cost burdened because they spend half or more of their income on rent.<sup>x</sup> 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.<sup>x</sup> One in five District children face housing insecurity.<sup>xi</sup> In its 2024 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 \$2,045 and monthly income necessary to afford it without experiencing rental cost burden at \$6,816.<sup>xii</sup> In contrast, the median household income among CLCPP clients served is \$1,515 per month.<sup>xiii</sup>

The *Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program* (“CLCPP”) ensures that District tenants facing eviction 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.<sup>xiv</sup>

CLCPP-funded organizations 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-funded organization. Funded organizations ensure LTLAN information is widely available through partnerships with community organizations, in mailed court documents about upcoming hearings, and through announcements during court hearings. LTLAN has fielded over 7,700 calls from tenants and small landlords seeking help in the last year and a half.<sup>xv</sup> In the first half of 2024, 83% of clients reached CLCPP organizations through LTLAN (61%) or called a funded organization directly (22%).<sup>xvi</sup>



CLCPP-funded organizations have a regular presence in court hearings to connect with unrepresented tenants to offer services, including remote hearings. Judicial officers have found the CLCPP’s role instrumental in the administration of justice.

CLCPP-funded organizations 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, working in partnership with affordable housing providers.

Robust data collection for the CLCPP program began in August 2019. Since that time and through June 2024, CLCPP-funded organizations have closed 13,156 eviction, voucher termination, and other eviction-related cases, providing legal assistance to 10,646 low-income D.C. residents.<sup>xvii</sup>

In order to leverage funds effectively, CLCPP organizations collaborate to train and refer cases for representation to pro bono attorneys. Each year, CLCPP organizations host a five-part eviction law training series attended by pro bono attorneys and offer a series of courthouse tours.<sup>xviii</sup>

The *Access to Justice Grants Program’s* additional investment in *eviction prevention* allows DCBF and Initiative-funded organizations to also pursue prevention-based strategies to halt evictions, including more directly involving non-legal, community-based organizations as partners. FY23 and FY24 funding supported eviction prevention efforts that allow Initiative-funded

organizations to continue work with canvassers to knock on doors and offer other support to ensure tenants at risk of eviction are aware of the availability of services to help.

Initiative-funded 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.



Initiative-funded organizations 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. They also educate tenant organizers about LTLAN so that this information is shared with tenants. Initiative-funded organizations 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-funded organizations 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 hoarding therapy intervention. Initiative-funded organizations 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-funded organizations participate in 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 legal organizations 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. FY24 and FY25 *Access to Justice Grants Program* funding supports numerous other housing strategies Initiative-funded organizations employ to keep District residents in safe, healthy housing, such as:

**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 after a housing conditions case is initiated

Children's Law Center

- helping tenants facing environmental health hazards and unsafe 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 to foster continued, intergenerational communities;
- 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 issues like access to public benefits, estate planning and probate, housing, and record sealing.

## APPENDIX B: PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

The Initiative supports a wide range of funded projects at legal organizations 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. Instead, successful intervention promotes community resiliency and stability. Some examples of the ways the program promotes public safety and community well-being include:

- *Keeping individuals and families safe.* Initiative-funded organizations offer trauma-informed services to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in all eight Wards. Initiative-funded organizations have mobilized to offer support in the form of emergency legal services and crisis safety planning and 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<sup>xix</sup> show that 88% of petitioners in domestic violence matters seeking civil protection orders lack counsel. Specialized services support survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and victims of crime.
- *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 Latino 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.
- *Promoting family stability.* The Initiative supports a wide range of projects at funded organizations that promote family stability. At least three projects 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. Initiative-funded organizations partner with the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) in their effort to establish a new 211 Warmline prevention program, which is intended to increase families' early access to health and human services to build stability, well-being, and resilience, therefore preventing child abuse and neglect.
- *Minimizing family conflict.* Initiative-funded organizations provide representation to District residents trying to resolve family conflict in the D.C. Superior Court. For

example, one project is aimed at providing specialized, trauma-informed support to children involved in custody disputes 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.<sup>xx</sup> 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.

- *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, cancer patients, and other special populations. 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, such as uncontrolled asthma due to mold-infested homes.
- *Promoting education opportunities for youth.* Initiative funds support legal services to parents and students to 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.
- *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, probation issues, child support, child custody, and consumer issues is also offered. Projects at funded organizations 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.”<sup>xxi</sup>
- *Support to the District’s immigrant population.* Initiative funds support legal help to combat notario fraud, protect unaccompanied minors, and offer culturally specific legal services to targeted populations within the immigrant community.



## APPENDIX C: PROMOTING ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY

Projects at Initiative-funded organizations also lessen economic risk and inopportunity and promote community well-being and stability through the *Access to Justice Grants Program*:

- *Stabilizing credit for low-income residents and helping protect critically needed funds.* Projects at funded organizations 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 Latino D.C. residents. The District saw an alarming number of these consumer problems before the pandemic, and District residents 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. Scams have also become more sophisticated with the rise of AI, putting D.C. residents at risk. Six Initiative-funded organizations 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 funded organization kept a total of nearly \$1 million in the pockets of over 1,000 District families facing debt and consumer issues last year.

**THE INITIATIVE'S IMPACT**  
**ECONOMIC IMPACT**

**PROMOTING INDIVIDUAL SECURITY**  
One funded organization kept nearly \$1 million in the pockets of over 1,000 D.C. families facing debt & consumer issues last year.

**BENEFITS SECURED**  
Another organization reported that the equivalent of just under 2.5 lawyers secured over \$850,000 in vital public benefits for its 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.

- *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. Requests for legal assistance have clustered around unemployment insurance, terminations, and employers' failures to pay wages or other benefits. Even before the pandemic, litigants in unemployment-related matters at the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings were unrepresented by counsel 91% of the time.<sup>xxii</sup> Specialized employment projects at funded organizations support working mothers and those seeking

assistance in applying for paid family leave benefits, and address discriminatory practices in the workplace in order to reduce income inequality.

- *Preserving intergenerational homes through heirs property and other probate-related work.* The District has prioritized maintaining and growing homeownership among longtime District residents. The ability to navigate the probate system can mean the

difference between 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 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 for which they are entitled has always been an important part of the Initiative. Providers play a critical role in working with government agencies like DHS and the DDCF to ensure that public benefit programs are accessible to the client community. There is a large gap in services for District residents navigating issues at the D.C. OAH, which hears cases relevant to vital public benefits such as unemployment insurance, TANF, SNAP, rental subsidies, shelter services, and health benefits – a gap that providers struggle to fill.<sup>xxiii</sup> The equivalent of just under 2.5 lawyers at one funded organization secured more than \$850,000 in vital public benefits for their clients. The Initiative also supports 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, projects at funded organizations help District families address housing code violations or other environmental health hazards that often exacerbate medical conditions like asthma. One Initiative-funded organization 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.
- *Identifying financial support for health-beneficial investments* where one Initiative-funded organization helped secure \$20 million in federal funds in 2024 to upgrade more than 700 units across six properties in the District to reduce asthma triggers and improve air quality – both securing direct and immediate benefits for residents will also likely further reducing health-related costs for the District.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## 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. The District’s investments have allowed DCBF to expand necessary interventions to get closer to meeting the demand for legal help and address persistent gaps in legal services delivery.

The Commission’s *Delivering Justice* report<sup>xxv</sup> described the civil justice crisis facing the District before the pandemic. Initiative-funded organizations 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 demanded greater capacity to service them, with hearing preparation and participation taking longer and matters becoming more complex due to the number of statutory and practice-based changes since the pandemic. Our post-pandemic world has created a new ‘normal’ whereby legal services providers are serving clients simultaneously in both remote and in-person environments.

Here are some snapshots of needs identified by Initiative-funded organizations:

- *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.<sup>xxvi</sup>
- *Eviction remains at crisis level.*
  - More than 81,000 District rental households are “housing-cost burdened” because they spend thirty percent or more of income on rent; 40,000 are “severely” housing-cost burdened because they spend half or more of their income on rent. (The number of *all* household types that are housing-cost burdened is more than 105,000, with 50,000 considered “severely” housing-cost burdened.)<sup>xxvii</sup>
  - 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 Latino residents, and Ward 7 and 8 residents.<sup>xxviii</sup>
  - In its 2024 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 \$2,045, and monthly income necessary to afford this rent without experiencing rental cost burden at \$6,816.<sup>xxix</sup> In contrast, the median household income among CLCPP clients served is \$1,515 per month.<sup>xxx</sup>
  - There have been over 7,700 calls to the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network in 2023 and the first half of 2024.

- *Domestic violence remains a chronic, growing area of need.*
  - One in four women in the District have experienced domestic violence, and cases 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 25% more clients in 2023 than the same period in 2022, with 2024 seeing similar increases in need.
  - D.C. SAFE – the source of a majority of referrals for civil protection orders received by Initiative-funded organizations – experienced 35,464 calls to their Crisis Response Line and made 16,635 unique referrals in fiscal year 2024.<sup>xxx</sup>
  - Emerging needs among domestic violence survivors include enforcement of gun relinquishment requirements for respondents in civil protection orders and anti-stalking protections.
  - One organization co-counseled with 600+ volunteer attorneys (for an equivalent of over 48,000 donated hours of legal services worth \$18 million) to better meet client needs.
  
- *Economic stressors persist.*
  - An Initiative-funded organization reported that half of its clients fully or partially lost employment because of the pandemic, exacerbating their already existing economic vulnerability.
  - For those who are employed, Initiative-funded organizations ensure that employer legal requirements like wage protection and provisions related to domestic workers are met.
  - One organization reported a 15% increase in requests for consumer debt legal help over the previous year. More District residents were also seeking help with bankruptcy. In Wards 7 and 8, 50% of people have some form of delinquent debt.<sup>xxxii</sup>
  - Credit defaults, which are typically a predictor of debt collection volume, are at a 14-year high,<sup>xxxiii</sup> and filed cases now have more complex litigation needs to ensure current protections are honored.
  - Projects at funded organizations offer financial literacy programs to District residents to protect income and asset security, particularly District youth. This is critical, as the most recent Nation’s Report Card on Financial Literacy gave D.C. an “F,” placing it in the lowest 20 percent of the country (primarily because financial literacy is not readily available in traditional educational settings).<sup>xxxiv</sup>
  - A January 2025 report found that 167 foreclosures were filed in the District in March 2024, a 17% increase from the prior month, with the District having a foreclosure rate higher than all 50 states.<sup>xxxv</sup>

- *Family conflict often requires legal intervention.*
  - In D.C.'s Family Court, 83-93% of litigants lack counsel.
  - The Initiative-funded Family Law Assistance Network has fielded close to 4,400 calls from District residents seeking this type of assistance since its inception in March 2020, with a trend of year-over-year increases. For example, with just one month to go in 2024, FLAN had already served 152% more people than the prior year (from 951 to 1,433).
- *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.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This includes end-of-life planning to ensure the economic viability of intergenerational families.
  - FY25 funding facilitated the creation of a new coordinated effort, the Probate Legal Assistant Network, which has streamlined access to these critical services.
  - One organization's 'Legal Information Help Line' received 1,619 calls regarding probate or life planning issues over a two-year period. In 2022, four of every ten 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.
  - There is a consistent and growing need for legal help in securing appropriate special education services and education access for students at-risk and with disabilities, especially older youth – and ensuring that these students have access to the District's range of school choice options.
  - 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.
  - District residents are facing increasing challenges in securing and maintaining access to Social Security benefits.

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

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- <sup>i</sup> To learn more about the Commission and our work, see [www.dccacesstojustice.org](http://www.dccacesstojustice.org).
- <sup>ii</sup> Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation. This only includes those for whom their Ward was known.
- <sup>iii</sup> 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.
- <sup>iv</sup> Data provided by the D.C. Bar Foundation.
- <sup>v</sup> NALP's 2023 Associate Salary Survey report shows that the overall median first-year associate base salary as of January 1, 2023, was \$200,000 compared to \$64,000 for legal services attorneys, whose salaries even fall well below their public service peers. National Association of Law Placement, *Salaries and Compensation Research*, available at <https://www.nalp.org/salariescompensation>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Examples include program evaluation reports that can be found at <https://www.dccbarfoundation.org/reports>, including 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).
- <sup>vii</sup> 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>
- <sup>viii</sup> The campaign establishes revenue-based benchmarks for law firm donations to legal services organizations. <https://dccacesstojustice.org/raising-the-bar/>
- <sup>ix</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2023 1-year estimates* (published Sept 2024) available at <https://data.census.gov/table?q=B25140&g=160XX00US1150000>.
- <sup>x</sup> Claudia D. Solari et al, Urban Institute, *Housing Insecurity in the District of Columbia* (November 16, 2023).
- <sup>xi</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>xii</sup> Out of Reach: District of Columbia | National Low Income Housing Coalition, available at <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/dc>
- <sup>xiii</sup> 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 2024).
- <sup>xiv</sup> A range of relevant reports is available at <https://www.dccbarfoundation.org/reports>. 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 DC," *The DC Line* (August 22, 2022, updated December 9, 2022).
- <sup>xv</sup> *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 2024), *supra* note xiii, at 6.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Id.* at 5.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>xix</sup> 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 DC Courts and the DC Office of Administrative Hearings is available at [https://dccacesstojustice.org/reports\\_extra.html](https://dccacesstojustice.org/reports_extra.html).
- <sup>xx</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Prescott, J., Starr, S., *Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical Study*, Harvard Law Review, 133, no. 8 (2020) at 2460-2555.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Delivering Justice*, *supra* note xix, at 210.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <https://childrenslawcenter.org/news/washington-business-journal-d-c-nonprofits-to-upgrade-air-quality-in-700-multifamily-homes/>.
- <sup>xxv</sup> D.C. Access to Justice Commission, *Delivering Justice*, *supra* note xix.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Id.* A summary of representation rates in D.C. Courts and the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings is available at [https://dccacesstojustice.org/reports\\_extra.html](https://dccacesstojustice.org/reports_extra.html).
- <sup>xxvii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *supra* note ix.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Solari, et al., *supra* note x.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Out of Reach, *supra* note xii.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *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 2024), *supra* note xiii.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> DC Safe, *DC Safe FY24 by the Numbers*, available at <https://www.dcsafe.org/financials-reports>.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Miranda Santillo, Mingli Zhong, Oriya Cohen, Urban Institute, *Washington, DC, Has Glaring Financial Health Inequities. So Do Most American Cities* (October 6, 2022).
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Adriana Morga, *Here's what you need to know about credit card defaults*, Associated Press (January 9, 2025).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> American Public Education Foundation, *The Nation's Report Card of Financial Literacy* (2023-2024).
- <sup>xxxv</sup> SoFi Learn, *Foreclosure Rates in all 50 States in March 2024* (January 9, 2025).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Council for Court Excellence and D.C. Access to Justice Commission, *Strengthening Probate Administration in the District of Columbia* (February 2022).
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