



**Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole**

**Written Statement of Hon. Anna Blackburne-Rigsby, Chief Judge, D.C. Court of Appeals
and Hon. Milton C. Lee, Jr., Chief Judge, D.C. Superior Court**

In Support of the Access to Justice Initiative

The District of Columbia Courts submit this testimony to express our support for the Access to Justice Initiative. The Initiative is indispensable to ensuring that all District residents, regardless of income, have meaningful access to our civil justice system. The D.C. Courts are confronted every day by the widening civil justice gap, driven by the high number of litigants who must represent themselves because they cannot afford legal counsel. For thousands of residents, meaningful access to justice depends on the availability of free or low-cost legal help.

The Access to Justice Initiative is a fundamental and essential part of any effort to provide equal access to justice for District residents facing significant civil legal challenges. It is a critical tool in securing legal representation for the thousands of litigants who seek redress or to defend their rights 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 safety, their homes, their financial security – 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 Chief Judges, we see first-hand how important legal services providers are to the administration of justice. The Courts partner 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 information, advice, brief service, or limited representation, 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 to these valuable resources. Each year thousands of court litigants are served through these projects.

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 defenses, and present their evidence and arguments persuasively. For the high percentage of litigants who also are impacted by disabilities, low literacy challenges, 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 *pro bono* services in our courts. Legal services providers ensure that the cases placed with volunteer lawyers are adequately 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.

Additionally, the Access to Justice Initiative is critical because the D.C. Courts have a high rate of judicial vacancies. The Court of Appeals currently has two vacancies, one since 2013. The Superior Court has thirteen vacancies. These vacancies significantly reduce judicial resources, so well-presented cases by lawyers are more important than ever. Access to legal counsel makes our courts work more efficiently. Lawyers help present cases more effectively, reducing delays and easing the burden on judges. 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

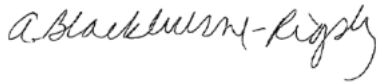
lengthy court proceedings. Litigants remain in dire need of representation to navigate the legal system, as well as understand and protect their rights.

As court leaders, we are also charged with ensuring the fair administration of justice. Public trust and confidence in the courts is essential to our democratic system. In 2023, we reaffirmed our institutional commitment to access to justice by establishing a dedicated Access to Justice Unit at the D.C. Courts. This unit brings together and coordinates several core court-based efforts: the Court Navigator Program, Pro Bono Program, Disability Access Program, and the development of a new Justice Resource Center. These programs are designed to assist unrepresented litigants in understanding court processes, completing forms, preparing for hearings, accessing legal help, and connecting to vital services. Establishing the Access to Justice Unit reflects our recognition that courts have a responsibility not only to adjudicate disputes, but also to ensure that all people—regardless of income, ability, language, or legal knowledge—can meaningfully participate in the justice system. However, no matter how much the Courts do institutionally to expand access to justice, litigants feel they are treated more fairly when they have counsel by their side.

Legal services providers continue to play an essential role in advancing access to justice in partnership with the D.C. Courts. Innovations developed during the pandemic—such as centralized hotlines—are now permanent features, helping unrepresented litigants connect with legal help more quickly and conveniently. In high-volume courtrooms with high rates of unrepresented parties, the Courts and legal services providers have implemented new data-sharing protocols that enable proactive outreach. As a result, attorneys can contact litigants in advance of scheduled hearings to offer assistance—connecting them to services earlier and improving case outcomes. These efforts, supported by Access to Justice funding, reflect a shared commitment to meeting litigants where they are.

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 well-resourced legal services network to protect the rights of the District’s most vulnerable residents. The Access to Justice Initiative plays an essential role in providing

that support. Thank you for the opportunity to submit our written testimony on behalf of the Access to Justice Initiative.

Handwritten signature of Anna Blackburne-Rigsby in cursive script.

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

Handwritten signature of Milton C. Lee, Jr. in cursive script.

The Honorable Milton C. Lee, Jr.
Chief Judge, D.C. Superior Court

May 13, 2026