



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

**Written Statement of Erin Larkin, Director, Access to Justice Unit, DC Courts
May 13, 2026**

In Support of the Access to Justice Initiative

Chairman and members of the Committee of the Whole, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Erin Larkin, and I serve as Director of the DC Courts' Access to Justice Unit. The DC Courts, comprised of the Superior Court and the Court of Appeals, are the District's local justice system. We are responsible for protecting rights, upholding the law, and resolving disputes fairly, peacefully, and effectively in the District of Columbia.

Over the past several years, the DC Courts have faced extraordinary challenges as demand for court services continues to grow while judicial vacancies persist and funding remains stagnant. Last year alone, 61,012 new cases were filed in the Superior Court, and 1,254 new matters were filed in the Court of Appeals.¹ Since 2023, filings in Superior Court have increased by 19 percent, while filings in the Court of Appeals have increased by 13 percent.² At the same time, the Courts continue to operate under 2023 funding levels with significant judicial vacancies — 13 of 62 judgeships in Superior Court remain unfilled, along with 2 of the 9 seats on the Court of Appeals.

In this challenging environment, the support provided through the Access to Justice Initiative is more important than ever. Civil legal services providers help stabilize households, resolve crises before they escalate, and ensure that when residents do enter the court system, they are better prepared and better supported.

Unlike in criminal cases, there is no right to appointed counsel in civil matters, and far too many people navigate serious legal problems alone because they cannot afford to hire a lawyer. According to a DC Access to Justice Commission report³:

¹ District of Columbia Courts, *Statistical Summary (2025)*, at 2, 4, https://www.dccourts.gov/sites/default/files/matters-docs/CY2025-Statistical-Summary_F.pdf.

² *Id.* at 2, 5.

³ DC Access to Justice Commission, *Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia (2019)*, https://dcaccesstojustice.org/files/Delivering_Justice_2019.pdf.

- **Family law:** 83 percent of plaintiffs and 93 percent of respondents in child custody and divorce cases are unrepresented;
- **Domestic violence:** 88 percent of petitioners and 95 percent of respondents are unrepresented;
- **Housing:** 88 percent of tenants in eviction cases appear without counsel, while 95 percent of landlords are represented;
- **Probate:** 97 percent of small-estate plaintiffs are unrepresented; and
- **Appeals:** 50 to 90 percent of cases filed in the Court of Appeals had at least one unrepresented party.

Every day, we see the consequences of this civil justice gap. In many cases, an unrepresented person faces an institutional party who is represented by counsel, such as in landlord-tenant, debt collection, and child support matters. These power imbalances can significantly and negatively impact a person's ability to understand their rights, navigate procedures, and present their case effectively. We also see high-stakes cases where both parties are unrepresented, such as child custody, divorce, and domestic violence cases. These cases often are deeply emotional and life-altering, yet many people navigate them on their own.

The DC Courts cannot address the need for greater representation in civil matters alone. This is where the Council's investment in the Access to Justice Initiative makes a profound difference. The Initiative funds legal services providers that deliver legal advice and representation to low-income residents, including through onsite legal resource centers at the Courts where people can access help when they come to court. Last year alone, these centers provided legal services to more than 2,500 people in family law, housing, child support, consumer law, and probate matters — services that would not exist without the Initiative.

As one client shared after receiving help at a court-based legal resource center:

"I'm extremely grateful for the legal guidance I received today. The attorney was very helpful, knowledgeable, and took the time to clearly explain my options during a stressful situation. Her advice was timely and gave me clarity and confidence moving forward."

The DC Courts are committed to making the justice system more accessible to the public. In 2023, the Courts created the Access to Justice Unit to help reduce barriers, simplify court processes, and improve usability for court users. Recently, the Courts revamped their website to make it easier to navigate and are collaborating with stakeholders to make sure self-help materials are easy to understand and accessible to people with disabilities. Last year, the Courts' self-help centers and navigators provided legal information to more than 10,000 people who lacked legal representation.

The Courts also have worked to expand pro bono participation within the legal community. The Courts partner with the DC Access to Justice Commission, the DC Bar Pro Bono Center, and the DC Bar to publish the Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll, which recognizes attorneys who dedicate at least 50 hours annually to pro bono service, including a High Honor Roll for those providing more than 100 hours.⁴ Building on that foundation, the Courts created an internal pro bono program three years ago to encourage and engage more lawyers in providing free legal help to low-income residents in the DC Courts. But even with these efforts, the need for legal assistance continues to far exceed available resources.

As part of a broader effort to expand access to legal assistance for District residents, the Courts convened a task force in 2023 to examine ways to use non-attorneys to increase the availability of legal help in civil matters. The task force studied regulatory barriers, reviewed national models, solicited public input, and developed recommendations to expand the range of professionals available to help people with their civil legal needs.⁵

As an outgrowth of that work, the Courts recently authorized a new Community Justice Worker model⁶ that will allow approved nonprofit legal services providers to train and supervise trusted community members to help residents with certain civil legal matters. These programs have the potential to significantly expand the number of trained legal helpers available to support District residents, particularly in underserved communities.

The DC Courts, however, cannot close the justice gap alone. Sustained investment in the Access to Justice Initiative is essential to ensuring that every resident who comes to the DC Courts has meaningful access to justice. Thank you for your continued commitment to access to justice. I am happy to answer any questions.

⁴ 2025 Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll, <https://www.dccourts.gov/court-resources/pro-bono-opportunities/capital-probono-honor-roll>.

⁵ See Report of the District of Columbia Courts Civil Legal Regulatory Reform Task Force (July 2025), <https://www.dccourts.gov/sites/default/files/CLRRTT-Final-Report-and-Appendices-7-31-2025.pdf>.

⁶ Order No. M293-26 dated February 5, 2026 (amending D.C. App. R. 49(c) and adopting proposals from the Civil Legal Regulatory Reform Task Force's July 2025 Report, https://www.dccourts.gov/sites/default/files/2026-02/ORD-M293-26-Promulgating-CLRRTF-proposal_022026.pdf).