

ACCESSING JUSTICE IN D.C.

FY27

Budget Oversight Hearing Recap

ATJ IS A SOUND INVESTMENT:

50+ national studies show that legal services return

an estimated \$7 in economic benefit for every \$1 invested

\$6.2 million

in direct client benefits realized by just 1 grantee

= 359% return on investment

\$14.1 million in Medicaid costs avoided over 3 yrs

when housing conditions for children with asthma improved

Millions of dollars in pro bono support

made possible through case screening, training, and mentorship done by Initiative grantees

What We Heard: Proposed reduction to the ATJ Initiative will “dismantle” D.C.’s civil legal ecosystem – with nearly 40,000 fewer residents getting crucial help.

“Only the Council can now preserve what it has built.”

Ron Flagg, President, DC Bar Foundation & President, Legal Services Corporation

- **60+ witnesses** testified in person about the importance of the ATJ Initiative. **Dozens more** noted their support for restored Initiative funding and its vital role as part of a fully-funded OVSJG portfolio in their in-person and written testimony
- **Proposed 86% reduction to ATJ would mean:**
 - Critical and irreplaceable loss of services for up to 40,000 vulnerable District residents
 - Major staffing cuts (1/2 of staff or more at individual organizations; 240+ total – many of whom are DC residents)
 - Compounded stress on the victim safety network
 - Jeopardizing the innovative and collaborative work of the DC Resource Bridge, a new single-point-of-entry to find DC-based legal help that since its launch 8 months ago has engaged with over 1,700 DC residents
 - Risks to language access – the nationally recognized Community Legal Interpreter Bank provided on-demand/remote interpretations more than 9,000 times in 2025
- **Partnerships and collaborations with 180+ D.C. agencies and community organizations at risk**, with a significant impact on the efficient administration of justice in the DC Courts and OAH
- **Gutting this investment will cost the District more**
 - Through increased costs to other downstream systems
 - Magnified by millions of dollars in lost pro bono services



*This isn't just about legal representation,
it's about protecting families and giving people a fair chance.”*

– Testimony of Ms. S, Bread for the City client



*“Just because you don't have a lawyer
doesn't mean that legal case goes away”*

– Testimony of Misty Thomas Zaleski,
Executive Director, Council for Court Excellence

*“I was trapped in a legal maze that I
couldn't navigate alone”*

– Testimony of Ms. W., DC Bar Pro Bono Center client



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“Legal aid is not a luxury”

– Testimony of April Frazier Camara, President & CEO, National Legal Aid & Defender Association

“Hardworking middle-class families like mine rarely qualify for social service programs, yet we are frequently priced out of the help we need most”

– Testimony of Ms. C, Public Witness, and client of DC Affordable Law Firm

“It definitely makes me feel secure about living here in the District knowing that the DC politicians care about their constituents.”

– Testimony of Mr. B, Legal Aid DC client

The Council must protect this 20-year investment that ensures legal help is part of the safety net and enables the program’s reach throughout the entire community.

“Each case we handle is the story of a human being in crisis who just wants to be safe.” –

Sara Tennen, Volunteer Legal Advocates

- **Legal services are a sound investment that promote public safety, economic security, community stability, and avoid other government costs by:**
 - Keeping children out of emergency rooms, foster care, and in school (which also helps caregivers maintain jobs)
 - Avoiding shelter costs (which cost DC an average \$11,000 per stay) and higher Medicaid costs for homeless patients through eviction, foreclosure, and other housing work
 - Removing legal barriers to timely treatment and survival for cancer patients and others facing medical issues
 - Helping clients maintain income from public benefits and accessing federal dollars
 - Breaking down barriers to employment through sealing criminal records, fighting discrimination and wage theft, work authorizations, and enforcing workplace protections – putting money and tax revenue into D.C.’s local economy
 - Securing intergenerational transfers of property so heirs (widowed spouses, siblings, minor children) can access financial support and keep their family homes
 - Enforcing District protections related to discrimination, employment protections, debt collection, and more
- **Legal services are responsive to high and rising community need:**
 - Domestic violence rates, and the need for legal protections, remain persistently high
 - One large grantee has a 36% increase in case acceptance this year, and the highest intake level in their history
 - Another grantee saw 41% increase in families seeking education-related legal services
 - Credit defaults, scams, changing federal benefit requirements, and rising financial strain create legal needs and make affording legal help even more out of reach for District residents (where the average hourly rate of a private attorney is \$492)



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