



May 5, 2026

The Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

RE: FY27 Access to Justice Initiative Funding

Dear Chairman Mendelson, Judiciary Committee Chair Pinto, and Members of the D.C. Council:

On behalf of the District of Columbia Bar (“D.C. Bar” or “Bar”) and its past Presidents, we write to express our ardent support for the Access to Justice Initiative (the “Initiative”) and the D.C. Access to Justice Commission’s call for restoring program funding to past levels. The Council has consistently demonstrated leadership in ensuring that the District remains a model for the nation in recognizing the transformational value of providing low-income individuals with civil legal help.

The Mayor’s proposed FY27 budget funds the Initiative at only \$4.487M, a \$27.299M or 86% reduction from FY26, with the removal of both one-time and recurring funding. **We urge the Council to prioritize the preservation of this vital program and restore it to the FY26 funding level of \$31.785M.** This would be consistent with funding the program received in FY23 (\$31.689M), FY24 (\$31.668M), FY25 (\$31.668M), and FY26 (\$31.785M).

Initiative funds support 30+ D.C. nonprofits that last year provided essential legal assistance to 44,000 low-income District residents. Drastic cuts to this effective program will produce catastrophic consequences for these District residents and will put their safety, health, housing, and economic stability at risk. This places the District’s most vulnerable residents in even further jeopardy during a time of great economic stress and uncertainty.

Reducing support for the Initiative ultimately will result in a net increase to the District’s budget through increased costs to our social service ecosystem, including shelters, emergency medical assistance, law enforcement and public safety, and other strained public systems. At the same time, funding for legal services offers a high return on investment. The Legal Services Corporation reports that for every dollar invested in legal services, communities see an average of \$7 in economic benefits. As the District explores ways to reduce spending, funding for legal services is one of the most cost-effective ways to prevent these downstream costs. Funding the Initiative is not only the right thing to do for District residents; it is also the right thing to do for the District’s budget.

Moreover, the proposed cuts to Initiative funding would effectively remove an essential element of our civil justice system. We cannot overstate how destabilizing it would be to gut access to free legal help from our justice system.

Reducing investment in the Initiative will be especially damaging when community needs continue to increase. The District's staggering demand for civil legal services is longstanding, as detailed in the Commission's 2019 report "[*Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia*](#)." FY22 through FY26 budget increases positioned the District's legal services community to expand services to address unmet legal needs. This sustained public investment has paid off, with almost 9000 more District residents receiving legal help in FY25 than FY24. Yet demand for legal services remains high and continues to grow, especially in the areas of probate and estate planning, public benefits, housing, consumer and debt, domestic violence, and family law. Major changes to benefits programs and heightened community uncertainty and fear create even greater need.

Another important element of the Initiative is its role in growing pro bono support to help low-income District residents who are at-risk. Programs funded by the Initiative leverage other legal resources by recruiting our attorney members to do pro bono work. The D.C. Bar is the largest mandatory bar in the country, with more than 124,000 members nationwide and 66,000 members in the D.C. metropolitan area. Meaningful access to justice for every D.C. resident is one of the Bar's core values and providing pro bono services is both encouraged under our Rules of Professional Conduct and a moral commitment for many members. This commitment is exemplified by the more than 6,000 District-barred attorneys named on the 2025 Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll, administered in partnership with the D.C. Courts, D.C. Bar, D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, and the D.C. Access to Justice Commission.

As Bar leaders, we continually encourage our D.C. Bar members to devote more time to pro bono work through volunteering with legal services organizations. But pro bono attorneys simply cannot do their work without relying on Initiative-funded legal services providers to build trusting relationships with communities, screen cases, provide training, and offer mentorship—all of which take significant resources. Any cuts to funding for the Initiative's legal services grantees put at risk the multiplier effect of their capacity to support pro bono volunteers. Engaging with legal services providers through pro bono programs also strengthens bonds between legal services and private firms, and incentivizes private law firm giving, fueling a valuable public-private partnership and commitment to legal services.

The Initiative supports student loan repayment for lawyers employed by nonprofit legal services providers. This relatively modest investment keeps highly qualified, experienced lawyers serving District residents and is a key recruitment and retention tool for nonprofit legal employers. The Initiative also offers practical solutions that make a real difference in our community. Lawyers are problem-solvers who help their clients navigate difficult times to better outcomes, and in many cases, to avoid court and the further escalation of conflict. Without free civil legal services to help District residents navigate complicated issues and secure protections, our community's challenges will increase as unaddressed legal problems spiral into additional personal and community crises that eventually create burdens on other government programs. Funding for the Initiative must be maintained to ensure these critical services continue.

We thank each of you for recognizing the importance of providing access to justice for the residents of the District of Columbia. Initiative funding is the engine that keeps our network of legal service providers running and our pro bono partnerships thriving. Along with the Past Presidents of the D.C. Bar listed below, 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.

Sincerely,



Sadina Montani
President, 2025-2026



Diane A. Seltzer
President-Elect, 2026-2027

Past Presidents of the D.C. Bar in Support of the Access to Justice Initiative

Marna S. Tucker	1984-85
Philip A. Lacovara	1988-89
Sara-Ann Determan	1990-91
Jamie S. Gorelick	1992-93
Robert N. Weiner	1995-96
Myles V. Lynk	1996-97
Carolyn B. Lamm	1997-98
Andrew H. Marks	1998-99
Shirley Ann Higuchi	2003-04
John (Jack) C. Keeney	2004-05
John C. Cruden	2005-06
James J. Sandman	2006-07
Melvin White	2007-08
Robert J. Spagnoletti	2008-09
Kim Michele Keenan	2009-10
Ronald S. Flagg	2010-11
Darrell G. Mottley	2011-12
Andrea Ferster	2013-14
Brigida Benitez	2014-15
Timothy K. Webster	2015-16
Annamaria Steward	2016-17
Patrick McGlone	2017-18
Susan M. Hoffman	2019-20
Geoffrey M. Klineberg	2020-21
Ellen M. Jakovic	2022-23
Charles R. Lowery, Jr.	2023-24
Shaun Snyder	2024-25