

December 3, 2010

Councilmember Phil Mendelson
Chairperson, Committee on the Judiciary
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Suite 402
Washington, D.C. 20004

Via Facsimile & Email

Re: Access to Justice funding cuts

Dear Councilmember Mendelson:

We write to express our concern over the proposed funding cuts in the fiscal year 2011 budget for the Access to Justice Program, which provides legal services for low-income D.C. residents, a community legal interpreter bank, and a loan repayment assistance program for lawyers serving people living in poverty. Mayor Adrian Fenty's proposed 50% cut in FY2011, on top of the \$700,000 cut already made in FY 2010, poses the threat of far-reaching negative effects for the legal services community and the low income individuals served.

These cuts could not be proposed at a worse time. Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts, which also fund legal services, fell by nearly 60% in 2009, and further losses have occurred in 2010. The legal services network lost \$4.5 million, more than 25% of its total funding, in 2009 alone, which led to the loss of 12% of legal staff and nearly 40% of non-legal staff. The 2009 funding losses translated into a thousand fewer cases being handled before a court or administrative agency and over two thousand fewer clients receiving counseling, advice or brief services. The Mayor's FY2011 proposed cuts would result in the loss of 15-20 legal services lawyers, at a time when the need for their services has skyrocketed.

The Council should appreciate that these legal services save the District money. Studies from other jurisdictions found that for every dollar spent on legal assistance, the government saves between four and seven dollars. For example, access to counsel in domestic violence cases may result in domestic violence survivors being less likely to be victimized, saving the city funds for public safety, medical treatment, job loss, and interruption of education for minor children in the home. Preventing avoidable evictions reduces homelessness, shelter and other costs.

We respectfully urge that the Council of the District of Columbia modify the Mayor's recommendation to cut funding for civil legal services and loan forgiveness programs for public service lawyers to preserve these vital services for the people of the District.

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Sincerely,

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Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia

Habib F. Ilahi, Esq.
South Asian Bar Association of the District of Columbia

David Hsu, Esq.
Asian Pacific American Bar Association of the Greater Washington, D.C. Area

cc: Chairman Vincent Gray