



# HISPANIC BAR ASSOCIATION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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March 13, 2017

*Via Electronic Mail*

Chairman Phil Mendelson  
Council of the District of Columbia  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Suite 402  
Washington, D.C. 20004

## **Re: HBA-DC Support for the Expanding Access to Justice Act of 2017 (Bill 22-0024)**

Dear Chairman Mendelson:

On behalf of the Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia (HBA-DC), I write to express our strong support of Bill 22-0024, the Expanding Access to Justice Act of 2017 (EAJA). We commend the Council's efforts to validate the fundamental right to legal counsel for traditionally unrepresented tenants involved in housing disputes. This legislation takes important steps to address the District's housing crisis by narrowing the significant justice disparity between well-represented landlords and *pro se* tenant litigants, who may lack the knowledge to navigate complex D.C. housing laws.

Among its guiding principles, the HBA-DC aims to promote equal justice for all Latinos. The EAJA aligns with our organization's mission because it proposes the following meaningful steps to address a number of critical shortcomings that impact the daily lives of District residents:

- Defense against eviction lawsuits;
- Enforcement of the housing code to correct harmful housing conditions;
- Preservation of housing subsidies;
- Enforcement of the District's rent control laws, by contesting housing provider petitions or bringing tenant petitions; and
- Preservation of the rights of individuals in the homeless services system.

Without legal counsel in housing matters, the District's tenants face great challenges to asserting their rights in court. The disparity between litigants who have counsel and those who do not is particularly striking when a basic human need such as safe shelter is at stake. The lack of access to legal counsel in housing matters for the most vulnerable residents of the District is, at its core, a moral injustice, and the Council should embrace the opportunity to address it through the reasonable means provided in this Act.

HBA-DC supports efforts to expand access to legal counsel and similar efforts to address the District's unrepresented tenant population. The HBA-DC urges the Council to approve the EAJA as it takes an important step to even the playing field. As the drafters of the bill aptly explained, "[s]afe, secure, and accessible housing is essential to achieving equal access to all other fundamental needs. Without [such] housing, individuals and families too often cannot preserve family integrity, gain employment or other income, or enjoy access to healthcare, proper nutrition, and education." If this legislation becomes law, our membership stands ready to assist.

We thank you for your attention and consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,



Benjamin Hernández-Stern  
President  
Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia

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