

District Voluntary Bar Associations Calls For Consistent Funding for Civil Legal Services

April 11, 2023

The Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

RE: FY24 Access to Justice Initiative Funding

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

We are writing as leaders of the District's voluntary bar associations to thank the D.C. Council for the creation of the Access to Justice Initiative and urge the Council to continue its robust support of the program in FY24. This cutting-edge initiative is a model for the country, providing critical and impactful legal assistance to low-income District residents. Legal support leads to better outcomes and a fairer, more just legal experience for District residents.

That is why the proposed FY24 budget reduction of 60% - from \$31.689 million to \$13.018 million – is so troubling. A drastic cut to one of the District's vital tools of recovery will have potentially devastating consequences for District residents. **With the budget now in your hands, we urge the D.C. Council to prioritize the restoration of this funding to the fiscal 2023 level.**

Legal services lawyers provide desperately needed legal support to DC's most vulnerable citizens. Initiative grantees further leverage Initiative funding by recruiting pro bono counsel from law firms, corporations, and the government to represent the clients they lack the capacity to help. Consistent funding for legal services is especially important as it enables organizations to train new attorneys to improve their skills and become even more effective advocates for their clients. It also allows legal service providers to continue investing in the growth of vibrant pro bono partnerships with pro bono volunteers who dedicate significant amounts of money and countless hours providing pro bono legal services to our neighbors in need. However, pro bono service cannot be sustained without a network of well-funded, stable, and professional full-time civil legal services providers who are experts in their fields.

By eliminating access to critically needed legal services, the Mayor's proposed cut will put the safety, health, housing, and economic stability of some of the District's most vulnerable populations at risk. Eliminating historic investments made in the program in FY22 and FY23 is especially damaging where we see community need only increasing. The public health crisis

served to highlight the vast scope of unmet legal needs and clearly demonstrated the vital role civil legal services play in any successful recovery. The Initiative serves as the foundation of this important work. Drastic cuts will have catastrophic consequences, particularly for our communities of color.

The District's leadership in increasing public funding for the Initiative serves as a powerful reminder of the critical need for the provision of civil legal services to the welfare of the District. Your leadership in investing in civil justice is commendable, and we implore you to further invest in the Access to Justice Initiative as a means of creating a more equitable city.

Again, we thank the District government for its recognition of the importance of providing access to justice for the residents of the District of Columbia. 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 to FY23 levels.

Sincerely,

Christina Jackson
Executive Director
Washington Council of Lawyers