

**District Voluntary Bar Associations Urge the D.C. Council to Prioritize Access to Justice Funding**

July 1, 2025

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

RE: Prioritize Restoring Access to Justice Initiative Funding to \$31.668M in FY26

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 make clear the critical nature of the Access to Justice Initiative and the dire need for continued public investment in civil justice. Cuts to this funding would profoundly impair access to life-changing and life-saving services, and we need your support to ensure this does not happen.

We are greatly concerned about the proposed FY26 budget reduction of 67% to \$10.457 million. A drastic cut to the District's uniquely essential community resource 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 \$31.668M.**

The Access to Justice Initiative directly advances the mission of the D.C. Council to improve the quality of life of D.C. residents and is cost-effective. The Legal Services Corporation recently issued a report examining 50+ economic impact studies of civil aid and found that, on average, there is \$7 in savings for every \$1 spent on civil legal aid. Locally, we know that medical-legal partnerships have secured \$3 in Medicaid savings for every \$1 invested on legal help to address health-harming problems.

At a time when legal needs in the District are rising exponentially, investing in civil legal services is a must. Legal services lawyers provide desperately needed legal support to DC's most vulnerable citizens. During a recent budget oversight hearing, organization after organization testified that should the cuts to Initiative funding be implemented, providers will face staff reductions, program closures, and a decrease in client capacity. Initiative funding also allows organizations to leverage partnerships to train and retain skilled public-interest lawyers. DC residents cannot afford to lose their skill and dedication when as high as 97% of litigants in some high-volume courts already go unrepresented.

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. It also allows legal service providers to continue investing in the growth of vibrant pro bono partnerships by expanding partnership networks and recruiting new volunteers. 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.

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 urge you to prioritize restoring

past funding levels for this critical program. 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 \$31.668M.

Sincerely,

Christina Jackson  
Executive Director  
Washington Council of Lawyers

American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (AAJLJ)  
Iranian American Bar Association's Washington DC Chapter (IABA DC)  
Metropolitan Washington Employment Lawyers Association (MWELA)  
Washington Bar Association, Inc.  
Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia