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Promoting Public Interest and Pro Bono Service

May 23, 2017

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The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chair
The Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Suite 504
Washington, DC 20004

Re: Support for FY18 Budget Proposals for Access to Justice Initiatives
and the Expanding Access to Justice Act of 2017

Dear Council Member Mendelson:

Washington Council of Lawyers has reviewed the FY18 Budget Report of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. We write to voice our support for the Committee's recommendation to increase access to justice funding by \$4,781,000, \$281,000 of which shall be used for the established Access to Justice Initiative and \$4.5 million shall be used to fund the Committee's new Budget Support Act subtitle, the Expanding Access to Justice Act of 2017. We applaud yours and the D.C. Council's leadership on access to justice, and urge the Committee of the Whole to support the Committee's recommendations in their entirety.

Founded in 1971, Washington Council of Lawyers is the area's only voluntary bar association dedicated exclusively to promoting *pro bono* service and the public-interest practice of law. Our members represent every sector of the Washington legal community: law firms, law schools, private and nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. Our mission is to help our justice system serve everyone, including those who are poor or marginalized. We advocate for policies that expand access to justice. Our members share a common concern for the well-being of our community and the integrity of our Civil and Constitutional Rights.

We know that too often the District's most vulnerable residents navigate the civil legal process alone, even when their fundamental human needs, such as shelter, protection from violence, health care, and income are at stake.

Funding the Expanding Access to Justice Act of 2017 will help to level the playing field for low-income individuals litigating cases in landlord-tenant court, where only 5 to 10 percent of tenants currently have counsel (compared with 95 percent of landlords). We also know that saving families from eviction ensures a better quality of life for needy families and the larger District community, with better health, academic, and employment outcomes.

Dedicating resources to provide counsel to individuals in eviction cases will increase meaningful access to the courts for vulnerable District residents and put the District at the forefront of the national Civil Gideon movement. We are so pleased to see the District become a leader in this field, and we support this noble and worthwhile endeavor.

Finally, we are confident that this effort will further galvanize the strong partnerships our area law firms have with local legal services providers in housing-related matters. While *pro bono* service alone cannot be the only answer in solving this crisis, funding the Expanding Access to Justice Act would create leverage to bring even more law firms on board to take *pro bono* housing referrals to complement the work of local legal services providers.

The importance of providing strong and consistent financial support for our legal services community through continued DC Access to Justice funding cannot be overstated. We applaud the D.C. Council's continued financial support for the organizations that provide free legal services to our neighbors in need. Their individual representation and systemic advocacy are important safeguards to our judicial system. We also hold in extremely high regard the D.C. Bar Foundation who efficiently and professionally manages the distribution of D.C. Access to Justice and IOLTA funds.

We commend the Council for taking steps to fund these important programs so that we can better meet the critical demand for civil legal services for the poor in our city.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely yours,



Kelly D. Voss
President, Washington Council of Lawyers

CC: Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie
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