



WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF LAWYERS

Promoting Public Interest Law and Pro Bono Service

Testimony before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety on FY 2020 Public Funding for Access to Justice Initiatives & Civil Legal Counsel Project Program

Increasing Access to Justice in the District of Columbia

Presented by Nancy A. Lopez
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Good morning Chairman Allen and Members of the Council. My name is Nancy Lopez and I am the Executive Director of the Washington Council of Lawyers, the public-interest bar association for the District of Columbia. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak here today on the critically important topic of funding for legal services.

Since its founding in 1971, Washington Council of Lawyers has been the only voluntary bar association in the District of Columbia solely dedicated to promoting *pro bono* and public-interest law. We have over 400 dues-paying members. They are public-interest-minded lawyers, legal professionals and law students. Our members work at small and large law firms, corporate counsel offices, local and federal government agencies, law schools, legal services providers and policy organizations. They represent the private sector, including the participation of individuals from dozens of law firms, as well as the non-profit sector, including representatives from most of the legal services providers who benefit from the Access to Justice Initiative and Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program funded by the D.C. government with the support of the D.C. Council.

First, I would like to express the gratitude of the members of Washington Council of Lawyers for the DC Council's past support for legal services in the District of Columbia. Your consistent and dependable support have made it possible to offer and maintain higher quality legal services for citizens in need in the District of Columbia. Legal services lawyers, along with pro bono counsel from law firms and government, provide desperately needed legal support and advice to DC's most vulnerable citizens, including children, seniors, the disabled, veterans and survivors of domestic violence. Consistent funding for legal services is especially important because it enables organizations to train their new attorneys to improve their skills and become even more effective advocates

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for their clients. It also allows legal service providers to make ongoing investment in their staff, recruiting, hiring and training good lawyers who can provide the highest quality legal representation. Irregular funding, on the other hand, is counter-productive because it causes organizations to lose talented lawyers in response to funding cuts. Washington Council of Lawyers is especially grateful to the DC Council for its commitment to the issue of legal services funding which has allowed us to build a more effective legal services network.

Legal services lawyers are essential to creating and maintaining the strong pro bono culture in the D.C. legal community. Law firm pro bono programs depend on legal services providers to screen and vet pro bono clients, and mentor law firm pro bono attorneys. A strong legal services network helps to recruit more law firm and government lawyers to do pro bono work, creating a multiplier effect that enables more of the District's poorest and most vulnerable residents to access the legal services they need but could not otherwise afford.

The support of the D.C. Council over the last few years has changed the face of the Landlord and Tenant Branch at D.C. Superior Court through the Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program, launched in fiscal year 2018. This program, focused on eviction defense work, makes it possible for more housing lawyers to be present in the courthouse, allowing more clients to access the legal information and representation they need to avoid unjustly losing their homes. This not only helps individuals and families, it also stabilizes communities throughout the city. Washington Council of Lawyers has been heartened to see increased collaborations across legal services organizations through our Eviction Defense Cohort trainings which enable practitioners to meet and share both their best practices and their challenges. We strongly support continued, consistent funding to ensure the stability and continued success of this important initiative.

Yet, despite the essential and committed work of these legal services and pro-bono attorneys, our community continues to face a substantial justice gap. The demand for legal services far outstrips the resources available, and as a result, poor families and individuals are navigating high-stakes legal situations—in which their families, homes, and livelihoods are on the line—on their own. Clients often seek legal services after a major family crisis or economic hardship such as loss of a job, a death in the family or a serious illness. They are frequently low-wage workers who are having difficulty meeting their basic needs such as housing, childcare and medical services, and for whom a single setback can plunge the family into crisis.

We urge you to continue to prioritize funding for legal services so that we can work towards our vision of a justice system that serves everyone, regardless of resources. Funding for legal services does not only serve the District's vulnerable populations, it also serves the wider D.C. community by reducing homelessness, increasing community stability, and helping the court system to operate more efficiently and effectively.

The members of Washington Council of Lawyers share a commitment to our mission to help our justice system serve everyone, regardless of wealth, race, gender, age, LGBT status or other characteristics. Funding for legal services is a critical element in achieving this vision because it helps build a justice system where everyone is treated fairly, including those who face the toughest legal challenges: children, veterans, seniors, ill or disabled people, and survivors of domestic violence. I urge the D.C. Council to continue its commitment to funding these important services for District residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions.