



# 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  
Washington Council of Lawyers

April 4, 2019

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

#### HONORARY BOARD

Hon. Anna Blackburne-Rigsby  
Roderic V.O. Boggs  
Brooksley Born  
Katherine S. Broderick  
Avis Buchanan  
Peter Edelman  
Marc Efron  
Patty Mullahy Fugere  
Katia Garrett  
Steven P. Hollman  
Elliot Minberg  
Blake Morant  
Linda E. Perle  
James Sandman  
Joseph M. Sellers  
Virginia E. Sloan  
Johnathan Smith  
Paul M. Smith  
Nkechi Taifa  
William Treanor

#### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President: David Steib  
Vice President: Jaya Saxena  
Communications: Alexis Applegate  
Secretary: Nancy Drane  
Treasurer: Jennifer Swedish

Julie K. Abbate  
Lise Adams  
Nicole Austin-Hillery  
Emily Batt  
Melinda Cooperman  
Katie Dilks  
Rebecca Goldfrank  
Arusha Gordon  
Karen T. Grisez  
Susan M. Hoffman  
Philip W. Horton  
Barbara K. Kagan  
Jack C. Keeney Jr.  
Amelia Kegan  
Mary C. Kennedy  
Anne King  
Mark L. Kovner  
Chinh Q. Le  
Paul Lee  
Carolyn Lerner  
Greg Lipper  
Michael Lukens  
Marcia Tavares Maack  
Sarah Marcus  
Joy P. Moses  
Robin C. Murphy  
Taryn Wilgus Null  
Lawrence A. Schneider  
Amy Senier  
Prianka Sharma  
Patricia L. Stasco  
Mia Sussman  
Elizabeth Symonds  
Jennifer Tschirch  
Marsha Tucker  
Erich Veitenheimer  
Kelly Voss  
Gwendolyn Washington  
David Zvenyach

#### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Nancy A. Lopez

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.