

**Testimony of Christina Jackson,
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Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Performance Oversight Hearing: OVSJG/Access to Justice Initiative
January 24, 2024**

Civil Legal Services in the District of Columbia

The Washington Council of Lawyers¹ submits this testimony to highlight the vital nature of the Access to Justice Initiative, a program funded through the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG).

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto, for your leadership on this issue, and thank you to this Committee for your support of the Access to Justice Initiative. Programs funded in FY 23 and FY 24 would simply not be possible without the Council’s strong backing during budget season. Your consistent and unwavering championing of these programs makes it possible to offer and maintain high quality legal services for residents in need.

Washington Council of Lawyers brings a unique perspective to this hearing. While we do not provide direct legal services, we support, train, mentor, and foster a collaborative community among legal services attorneys and pro bono volunteers who serve D.C. residents in need of legal help to address critical life challenges. From our distinct vantage point, we understand how our network of legal and social service providers collaborate to advance justice and support our neighbors.

One of the roles Washington Council of Lawyers plays in this collaboration is our partnership with the DC Bar Foundation, the administrator of the Initiative funds, in supporting grantee organizations and their staff. We facilitate trainings of eviction defense attorneys supported by the Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program (“CLCPP”) and of immigration lawyers whose organizations receive Access to Justice Grants funding. We are especially proud to be a part of the growth of the CLCPP, first established in fiscal year 2018, that provides crucial legal help to low-income tenants in eviction-related proceedings. Through our coordination of the eviction defense trainings for staff attorneys across seven grantee organizations, we have seen how this unified program focused on eviction defense has strengthened the way legal services are provided to District residents. We were pleased to recently expand our partnership with the DC Bar Foundation to also include work with a group of six immigration grantees and their staff attorneys.

¹ Founded in 1971, Washington Council of Lawyers is the only voluntary bar association in the District of Columbia dedicated solely to promoting pro bono and public-interest law. We have over 500 members including public-interest-minded attorneys, legal professionals, and law students. Our members work at legal services providers, policy organizations, small and large law firms, corporate counsel offices, local and federal government agencies, and law schools.

In addition to our targeted work with housing and immigration grantees, Washington Council of Lawyers offers wide-ranging professional skills trainings through our Litigation Skills Series. Here, we recruit experienced and respected litigators in our community to offer skills trainings in all aspects of litigation ranging from mediation to legal writing. Access to Justice funding allows the DC Bar Foundation to provide scholarships to their grantees ensuring they can attend focused, timely, and comprehensive skills trainings. Notably, these trainings are also offered to pro bono volunteers who often partner with legal services providers to serve DC residents in need of legal help. The foresight that the DC Bar Foundation has in ensuring its grantees have access to this type of professional support that otherwise might be cost-prohibitive is important.

Washington Council of Lawyers is proud of our unique role in supporting the work of Initiative grantees and its staff through our long-standing partnership with the DC Bar Foundation. Our contributions towards cross-organizational training and encouraging a collaborative approach to facing service delivery challenges has helped strengthen the provision of legal services to DC residents. We have seen the grantees we work with dramatically expand their community outreach, hone their ability to overcome unique challenges, leverage their unique organizational strengths, and be more efficient in legal services delivery. Concrete examples of these efforts include the establishment of a coordinated entry point for litigants to access services, affirmative outreach to litigants about available legal support, and collaboration on policy and systemic advocacy. The support the District government provides through the Access to Justice Initiative is essential for this positive work.

What we have described is just a small part of the breadth of the Initiative. As an organization that looks holistically at civil justice in DC, we are consistently struck by the unique and irreplaceable role the Initiative plays in ensuring that District residents facing a wide range of civil justice problems have the legal help they need. Put simply, the Initiative works. The funds support well-established legal services programs that have been in existence for decades and allow the community to respond to new challenges through innovation and cooperation. In this way, the Initiative ensures the District lives up to its responsibility to ensure low income residents have legal help to address the pressing issues they face, including housing, domestic violence, consumer debt, education, estate planning, family issues, expungement, disability, immigration, public benefits, discrimination, employment and jobs. It promotes stable housing through a continuum of strategies, including preserving intergenerational homes, preventing foreclosures and evictions, and working toward affordable, discrimination-free housing across the city. It promotes public safety and community resilience through legal intervention. It promotes economic opportunity through programs that protect workers, address debt-related legal crises, and promote financial literacy. It does this recognizing that the consequences of going without competent legal counsel can be long-term and reverberate across District neighborhoods and Wards.

Finally, the Initiative helps keep highly qualified, experienced lawyers serving District residents through student loan repayment assistance (“LRAP”). LRAP is a key recruitment and retention tool for legal services employers. Many of our members cite LRAP as a top reason they are able to continue as public-interest lawyers in DC. We cannot afford to lose their expertise due to their inability to repay their school loans.

The Access to Justice Initiative is a uniquely essential community resource. It supports our shared goals to keep D.C. residents in stable housing in safe neighborhoods with economic opportunities while maintaining the unique culture that is DC. We are grateful for the progress that has been made through the Access to Justice Initiative. While we know that the legal needs in our community still far outpace our ability to meet them, the Access to Justice Initiative is essential to advancing the priorities of a stable, safe, healthy and economically vibrant community.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the value of the Access to Justice Initiative. We appreciate this committee's support of civil legal aid and know that it will continue to prioritize investment in civil justice as a means of creating a more equitable city.