

**Testimony of Christina Jackson, Executive Director  
Washington Council of Lawyers  
Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Budget Oversight Hearing: Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants  
April 25, 2024**

Washington Council of Lawyers, the public-interest bar association for the District of Columbia, submits the following testimony to impress upon this Committee and the D.C. Council the critical 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 consistent support of the Access to Justice Initiative. We know you are as concerned as we are about the proposed drastic cuts in access to justice funding. Your strong and steady support of the programs funded by the Access to Justice Initiative is more important than ever to ensure meaningful and high-quality legal services for residents in need.

Initiative funding supports our legal services community's critical role in keeping District's residents housed, safe, and economically stable. The Mayor's proposed 67% cut (a cut of \$21.211M) to this funding will profoundly impair access to these life-changing and life-saving services. While our most vulnerable residents will suffer the severest impacts, these cuts will destabilize our city as a whole. Only by restoring this funding can D.C. continue to provide the legal services key to equitable and accessible justice in our communities.

We bring a unique perspective to today's hearing, spanning all sectors of the District's legal community. Washington Council of Lawyers supports, trains, mentors, and fosters collaboration among legal services, government, and private-sector lawyers committed to making legal support widely available to all who need it. From this distinct vantage point, we can speak to how these sectors work together to better protect our residents' human rights and promote healthier, safer communities. We specifically highlight the need for pro bono volunteers to help legal services lawyers address the enormous gap between the legal need in this city and the number of lawyers who serve DC residents. Without significant, consistent funding of civil legal services, providers are unable to effectively marshal pro bono volunteers to step into the gap. Below we highlight the impact of this funding and why it remains critical.

**The Cuts in Access to Justice Funding Would be Catastrophic.**

Our legal services providers ensure our most vulnerable residents have access to legal representation to address the pressing issues they face. Research makes clear that having an attorney is the single most impactful factor in achieving positive outcomes in our legal system. The District's more than thirty Access to Justice Initiative grantee organizations comprise the bulk of our legal services community, serving over 40,000 clients each year in a wide variety of issue areas as varied as housing, immigration, employment, domestic violence, consumer protection, and probate. ATJ funding has allowed them to continue and expand that support, both through their own work and the active use of pro bono volunteers. Many providers have used access to justice funds to develop programs to specifically serve residents in Wards 5, 7, and 8, where

poverty and other barriers to basic needs are concentrated and access to legal support is most needed.

Failure to restore access to justice funding will mean these vital programs will disappear, and providers will need to cut costs by reducing critical staff. Further, more than 200 District agencies and community organizations such as health clinics, schools, libraries, and social service providers rely on partnerships with initiative-funded legal organizations to serve our community. Cuts in access to legal services will widen existing cracks in support networks with compounding, interconnected ripple effects, increasing pressure on government systems, economic instability, truancy, and public health and safety concerns.

Cuts in funding will undermine critical community priorities like housing stability, economic progress, and public safety. Housing remains one of the most critical and fundamental civil justice needs for our many residents who are unable to pay rent or are struggling to raise families in unlivable housing conditions. Since the depletion of federal rental assistance and the end of the eviction moratorium, tens of thousands of D.C. residents remain significantly behind on rent and eviction filings have continue to increase. The lifting of moratoria protecting District consumers from collection actions has put the most vulnerable at risk. And the devastating impact of domestic violence continues at unprecedented levels since the spike triggered by lock down and economic hardship, with providers continuing to report steep increases in calls for support. Access to legal resources is no less than a lifeline for those facing these fundamental challenges, which are most acute for District families of color.

### **Effective Leveraging of Resources**

The Access to Justice Initiative is a unique, cutting-edge program that offers District residents the opportunity to address such a wide range of problems that often cannot be solved without legal help and legal services providers the ability to leverage resources across organizations. The District has among the most robust and diverse legal services community in our nation. With such a vast network of service providers collaboration is a powerful force multiplier, and Access to Justice Initiative funding has allowed grantee providers to develop creative collaborations to better serve their clients.

In addition to our phenomenal public-interest legal community, D.C. is a leader and model for its deeply rooted pro bono culture among law firms, corporations, and local and federal government lawyers. The District's law firms dedicate significant amounts of money and many hours to providing pro bono legal services to our neighbors in need. D.C. government lawyers can now take on pro bono cases, which has been a priority focus for Washington Council of Lawyers' advocacy efforts. But, even with the dedicated legal services lawyers and pro bono volunteers, the legal need far outstrips our ability to keep pace.

The impact of pro bono service cannot be overstated: leveraging these powerful resources expands access to legal services exponentially, which in turn saves the City untold amounts in long term resources and contributes to the overall safety and wellbeing of our community. This impact depends directly on support from and partnership with well-funded, stable, and professional full-time civil legal services providers who are experts in their fields. Pro bono lawyers rely on legal services lawyers to connect them with clients, conduct intake screening, provide mentoring, and identify systemic problems and solutions. D.C.'s network of legal services-law firm

partnerships for pro bono service delivery is among the largest and best in the nation. Access to Justice Initiative funding for civil legal services supports these partnerships and is critical to the continued ability of pro bono lawyers to serve clients in need.

### **Ensuring Qualified Lawyers Remain Serving D.C. Residents**

D.C.'s veteran legal services lawyers have been at the forefront of designing innovative solutions to systemic legal problems. Many-if not all- of the successful collaborative initiatives we have described were led by legal service attorneys whose deep understanding of our system's justice gaps is informed by years working to obtain justice for their clients individually and systemically. These types of creative solutions would be difficult for newer legal services lawyers to design and implement. Lawyers need years of experience to gain the knowledge and perspective needed to create these types of inventive programs. Consistent and stable public funding for civil legal services supports career legal services lawyers and minimizes turnover.

The D.C. Lawyer Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) in particular, both helps legal services providers retain existing staff and recruit new talent and is an essential component of the Access to Justice Initiative. Working in the legal services world means constantly engaging with system failures and the devastating impact on those most vulnerable. Many legal services attorneys struggle with burnout, fatigue, and frustration. The increased demand for legal services coupled with the trends following the Great Resignation has hit the public-interest legal community hard with staff turnover and challenges in filling open positions. LRAP not only provides important financial support, but it also demonstrates, in concrete terms, the value D.C. places on those attorneys' commitment to serving our community. At a time when legal services lawyers are working harder than ever under more challenging conditions, this type of assistance makes a difference.

### **Conclusion: A Justice-Focused City**

We are deeply grateful for the leadership the Council has provided by funding the Access to Justice Initiative. This support of the District's legal services community has helped District residents protect their legal rights and secure the basic necessities of food, shelter, education, and safety. Without legal representation, there can be no meaningful access to justice for the most vulnerable Washingtonians. That is why civil legal services are so important. We urge your continued support of public funding for the Access to Justice Initiative in the District of Columbia.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.