

**Written Testimony of Henry Floyd, Jr.,
Board President, Washington Council of Lawyers
Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Performance Oversight Hearing: OVSJG/Access to Justice Initiative
January 29, 2025**

Civil Legal Services in the District of Columbia

The Washington Council of Lawyers submits this testimony to express our appreciation for the Council's consistent support of civil legal services, highlight the important work being done through the Access to Justice Initiative, and make clear the dire need for continued public investment in civil justice. Through the Access to Justice Initiative, (a program funded by the Office of Victim Services Grants), tens of thousands of D.C. residents each year are supported during legally complex and stressful events such as eviction, domestic violence, employment discrimination, child custody, and much more. Most D.C. residents who need legal assistance to navigate these complexities are often the ones who cannot afford to pay. Their safety and that of their families, their stability, or their livelihood may hinge on having a lawyer to advise them, and if needed, to provide legal representation. A priority of the D.C. Council is to protect our neighbors, and better the District. We submit this testimony to call attention to how the Access to Justice Initiative is vital to meeting those priorities.

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto, for your continued leadership on this issue and this Committee for your continued support of the Access to Justice Initiative. The crucial services D.C. residents receive through this program would not be possible without your strong backing. Your consistent and unwavering championing of these programs sends a message to our neighbors that crucial legal representation will be available to them.

As the voluntary bar association whose mission is to ensure that our legal system treats everyone fairly, regardless of money, position, or power, we bring a unique perspective to this hearing. Founded nearly 50 years ago, our members represent lawyers in small and large law firms, local and federal government offices, corporate counsel offices, legal service providers, law schools, and policy organizations. Washington Council of Lawyers does not provide direct legal services. We support, train, mentor, and foster a collaborative community among the legal services, government, and private-sector lawyers who serve vulnerable D.C. residents. From our distinct vantage point, we have an overview of how our network of legal and social service providers collaborate to advance justice and support our neighbors.

We are pleased to provide testimony today alongside many of our civil legal services partners. The Washington Council of Lawyers has the distinct privilege of training attorneys and pro bono volunteers to serve vulnerable D.C. residents and providing mentorship to foster a hands-on learning network. Our training programs leverage the pro bono commitments of D.C. lawyers in the private sector, by teaching lawyers how to provide the services that D.C. residents most need. By cultivating a collaborative community among our civil legal services partners, we have a unique understanding of how our city's legal and social service providers address critical life challenges. We support the lawyers who are on the ground working with our residents every day.

From our distinct perspective, we offer three points to supplement the perspectives offered by our civil legal services partners today.

First, as an organization that looks holistically at civil justice in D.C., we attest that the Access to Justice Initiative improves the quality of life in District neighborhoods by fostering economic stability and improving public safety. By funding well-established legal services organizations, the Initiative facilitates stable housing through a continuum of strategies, including preserving intergenerational homes, preventing numerous foreclosures and evictions, and working toward affordable, discrimination-free housing opportunities. The Initiative also advances economic opportunity through programs that protect workers, address debt-related legal crises, and promote financial literacy. It promotes public safety and community resilience through legal intervention measures such as programs that support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, combat recidivism, and support at-risk youth.

Second, as an organization that supports civil legal services, we attest that the Access to Justice Initiative empowers attorneys and pro bono volunteers to better serve D.C. residents. Among our many activities supporting legal services and pro bono work, through our partnership with the DC Bar Foundation we train and work with housing and immigration attorneys to strengthen the way legal services are provided to District residents. We also help lawyers across all practice areas demystify the legal process for their clients, helping residents understand what are otherwise intimidating and complex proceedings. We offer wide-ranging professional skills training, led by experienced and well-respected litigators in the community, through our Litigation Skills Series. These trainings are provided to pro bono volunteers and legal services providers who serve D.C. residents in need of help. Via the DC Bar Foundation, we receive Access to Justice funding to help support our training programs and provide vital community-building and collaboration amongst the public interest community. In FY 24, we hosted 33 training sessions and educational programs, bringing more than 873 public-interest lawyers together to learn and improve their skills. In these ways, funding the Initiative ensures that legal services attorneys in the community receive the focused, timely, and comprehensive skills training that allows them to serve our District's residents.

Third, and finally, the Access to Justice Initiative helps attract and retain exceptional lawyers to serve as the backbone of the District's civil legal services. Keeping top talent with a deep understanding of D.C.'s legal system is vital, and programs like the public student loan repayment assistance program ("LRAP"), funded by the Access to Justice Initiative, remain a key recruitment and retention tool. Many of our members cite LRAP as a top reason they can continue as public-interest lawyers in D.C. Continued funding of the Initiative ensures that highly qualified, experienced lawyers remain champions of the District's most vulnerable residents. We cannot afford to lose their expertise because they cannot repay hefty student loans.

Simply put, the Access to Justice Initiative works. It directly advances the mission of the D.C. Council to improve the quality of life of D.C. residents. The Initiative is also cost-effective. As our partners at Legal Aid DC have noted, local governments save between \$2.40 and \$6.24 for

every dollar invested in providing legal representation in eviction cases.¹ Cutting these funds would cost the District much more than would be saved. Last year's Judiciary Committee report found that cutting \$18 million of the Initiative's funds would result in the District spending upwards of \$90 million to provide supplementary services for its residents in need.

While the Commission has continued to champion the Initiative, the effectiveness of the program remains at risk due to increased demands for civil legal services in our city. In the first two months of 2024, Legal Aid DC saw the highest number of applicants and accepted clients in a decade.² Similarly, the Chair of the Access to Justice Initiative reported that a nonprofit legal services organization has seen its client numbers double between 2019 and 2023.³ According to D.C. court records, eviction filings rose 42% from the first quarter of 2022 compared to 2023.⁴ Upwards of 90% of litigants now appear without a lawyer in D.C. Superior Court.⁵ Having competent representation is an important component of the legal system, and the Access to Justice Initiatives strives to provide vulnerable residents with the legal aid necessary to navigate and appropriately address the judicial system.

This Committee is a critical element in the continued fight to ensure that all District residents have access to legal services. The Washington Council of Lawyers is deeply appreciative of your ongoing support. We urge you to remain steadfast in your commitment to legal justice by ensuring the funding of the Access to Justice Initiative remains consistent. In so doing, you will safeguard access to effective legal services for the residents of the District.

¹ *Legal Aid DC Calls on Council to Reverse Mayor's Deep Cuts to Civil Legal Services & Other Programs Supporting Low-Income Residents*, Legal Aid, Apr. 3, 2024, <https://www.legalaiddc.org/blogs/mayor-bowser-2025-budget-cuts>.

² *Id.*

³ *Peter Edelman and James Sandman: The High Cost of Cutting Funding for Civil Legal Services*, The DC Line, May 12, 2023, <https://thedcline.org/2023/05/12/peter-edelman-and-james-sandman-the-high-cost-of-cutting-funding-for-civil-legal-services/>.

⁴ John Funk, *D.C. Legal Community Comes Out in Force to Support Access to Justice Initiative*, DC Bar, Apr. 18, 2023, <https://www.dcb.org/news-events/news/d-c-legal-community-comes-out-in-force-to-support->.

⁵ *Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia*, Access to Justice Commission (2023), <https://dcaccesstojustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Fact-Sheet-on-Pro-Se.pdf>.