

**Testimony of Christina Jackson,
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Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Budget Oversight Testimony
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants
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Access to Justice Initiative

The Washington Council of Lawyers submits this testimony to make clear the critical nature of the Access to Justice Initiative and the dire need for continued public investment in civil justice. Cuts to this funding would profoundly impair access to life-changing and life-saving services, and we need your support to ensure this does not happen.

We thank Chairperson Pinto for your continued leadership on this issue and this Committee for its support of the Access to Justice Initiative. Your consistent and unwavering concern for these programs sends a message to our neighbors that crucial legal representation will be available to them. We ask for your continued support of public funding for the Access to Justice Initiative

Through the Access to Justice Initiative, a program under the purview of the Office of Victim Services Grants, tens of thousands of D.C. residents each year are assisted during legally complex and stressful events such as eviction, domestic violence, employment discrimination, and child custody. Most D.C. residents who need legal assistance to navigate these complexities are often the ones who cannot afford to pay. Their safety, stability, livelihood, and family's wellbeing may hinge on having a lawyer to advise them, and if needed, to represent them in the courtroom.

We are pleased to provide testimony today alongside many of our civil legal services partners. The Washington Council of Lawyers¹ is a voluntary bar association whose mission is to ensure that our legal system treats everyone fairly, regardless of money, position, or power. We train, advocate, mentor, and build community among public-interest-minded lawyers and law students to promote pro bono service and public-interest law. We have 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 also 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

¹ Founded nearly fifty years ago, our members represent both the private and non-profit sectors. We bring together small and large law firms, local and federal government offices, corporate counsel offices, legal service providers, law schools, and policy organizations. Our organization includes over 500 dues-paying members, and we reach over 5,000 public-interest-minded lawyers, legal professionals, and law school students through our programs and communications.

challenges. We support the lawyers who are on the ground working with our residents every day and require consistent funding to do so.

We offer three points in support of restoring funding for the Access to Justice Initiative to supplement the perspectives provided by our civil legal services partners today.

The Access to Justice Initiative improves the lives of DC residents.

First, the Access to Justice Initiative enhances the quality of life in District neighborhoods by promoting economic stability and enhancing public safety. By funding well-established legal services organizations, the Initiative facilitates stable housing by working with landlords and tenants to resolve issues and avoid evictions. Initiative funding promotes public safety and community resilience by providing legal intervention measures such as programs that support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, combat recidivism, and support at-risk youth. Reduced funding would limit the impact and reach of these vital programs, further overstressing community organizations and widening existing cracks in support networks.

The Access to Justice Initiative furthers the Mayor's and the Council's vision for a strong D.C. You will hear from the legal services providers about what cuts to Initiative funding will specifically mean to the clients they serve. These overall cuts will result in significantly fewer clients being served, potential staff reductions, service reductions, and program cuts. It will also mean INCREASED rather than decreased costs to the District because of increased agency services that will be required if more residents are homeless, unable to access benefits, at risk for violence, vulnerable to consumer scams, in danger of losing employment, and much more.

The Access to Justice Initiative equips pro bono volunteers to better serve the community.

Second, the Access to Justice Initiative leverages the many pro bono volunteers to better serve D.C. residents. The legal community in the District of Columbia serves as a model for other cities due to its deeply rooted pro bono culture among law firms and corporations. But lawyers who work in the private sector may not have the precise skills necessary to help with the needs of our residents. Access to Justice funding ensures that pro bono volunteers are equipped to provide these crucial services. Through our partnership with the DC Bar Foundation, we offer pro bono volunteers training and mentorship opportunities, including our Litigation Skills Series and programs designed to demystify legal proceedings.

Pro bono lawyers rely on legal services lawyers to connect them with pro bono 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. The 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.

The Access to Justice Initiative trains and retains public interest attorneys.

Third, and finally, the Access to Justice Initiative helps train and retain exceptional attorneys to serve as the backbone of the District's civil legal services. Through Access to Justice Initiative funds, the DC Bar Foundation provides Initiative grantees with financial support for professional development trainings like our Litigation Skills Series, our immigration and eviction defense cohorts, and our Leadership Institute. In FY24, we trained 171 legal service lawyers through scholarships from the DC Bar Foundation. Our partnership enables us to bring together certain high-demand practice groups for additional substantive training, mentoring, and community-building through our cohorts (52 members collectively). Finally, we provided 27 mid-level supervisors at legal services organizations with leadership training and community development through our Leadership Institute. 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.

Furthermore, the Access to Justice funds allow highly talented law graduates to join and remain at legal services organizations by offering programs like the student loan repayment assistance programs ("LRAP"). 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.

Increasing Access to Justice funding is a cost-effective solution to growing legal demands.

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.² Cutting these funds would cost the District significantly more than the savings would be. 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.³ Similarly, the Chair of the Access to Justice Initiative reported that a nonprofit legal

² *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>.

³ *Id.*

services organization has seen its client numbers double between 2019 and 2023.⁴ According to D.C. court records, eviction filings rose 42% from the first quarter of 2022 compared to 2023.⁵ Upwards of 90% of litigants now appear without a lawyer in D.C. Superior Court.⁶ Having competent representation is a crucial component of the legal system, and the Access to Justice Initiative funds provide vulnerable residents with the necessary legal aid to effectively navigate the judicial system.

Conclusion

We appreciate the Council's continued leadership in securing funding for the Access to Justice Initiative. Our legal services providers stretch the funds they receive to reach as many clients as possible. Initiative funding maintains our network of well-funded, stable, and professional full-time civil legal services, while fostering pro bono partnerships with law firms and corporations that dedicate significant amounts of money and hours to providing pro bono legal services to our neighbors in need. We seek vital funding to empower legal services organizations and their pro bono partners to address the critical legal needs of our community. Decreasing funding would drastically reduce the number of people served daily and have a deeply damaging effect on the community.

This Committee is critical to the continued fight to ensure that all District residents have access to justice. The Washington Council of Lawyers remains deeply appreciative of your support. We urge you to remain steadfast in your commitment to justice by restoring the funding to the Access to Justice Initiative in Fiscal Year 2026. In so doing, you will ensure that access to effective legal services is a reality for the residents of the District.

⁴ *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/>.

⁵ 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->.

⁶ *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>.