

**Written Testimony of Christina Jackson,  
Executive Director, Washington Council of Lawyers  
Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
Performance Oversight Hearing: OVSJG/Access to Justice Initiative  
March 2, 2026**

Washington Council of Lawyers respectfully submits this testimony to express our appreciation for the Council's sustained commitment to civil legal services, to underscore the significant impact of the Access to Justice Initiative, and to emphasize the urgent need for continued public investment in civil justice.

Through the Access to Justice Initiative—a program administered by the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants—tens of thousands of District residents each year receive critical support while navigating legally complex and often destabilizing matters, including eviction proceedings, domestic violence, employment discrimination, child custody disputes, and related civil legal challenges. Those most in need of legal assistance are frequently individuals and families who lack the financial resources to retain private counsel. For many, access to legal advice and representation is determinative of their safety, housing stability, economic security, and overall well-being.

Protecting District residents and strengthening our communities remain central priorities of the Council. The Access to Justice Initiative is imperative to advancing these objectives. Accordingly, we submit this testimony to highlight the Initiative's essential role and to urge continued and robust public support for its work.

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto, for your leadership, and this Committee, for your continued and unwavering support of the Access to Justice Initiative. The crucial services D.C. residents receive through this program would not be possible without your fight to ensure there is funding to address the vast legal needs in the District. Your consistent and resolute championing of these programs sends a clear, unequivocal message to our neighbors that, when they face life-altering legal challenges, crucial legal representation will be available to protect their rights and safeguard their futures.

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 more than 50 years ago, our members represent lawyers in legal service providers, law firms of all sizes, local and federal government offices, corporate counsel departments, law schools, and policy organizations. While Washington Council of Lawyers does not provide direct legal services, we strengthen the provision of legal services through support, training, mentoring, and fostering a collaborative community among the legal services, government, and private-sector lawyers who serve vulnerable D.C. residents.

Washington Council of Lawyers is uniquely positioned to train lawyers and pro bono volunteers to serve vulnerable District residents, while also providing mentorship that strengthens a

practical, experience-based learning network. Our training initiatives help maximize the pro bono contributions of private-sector lawyers by preparing them to address the legal challenges most frequently confronting District residents. Through sustained collaboration with civil legal services organizations, we have gained deep insight into how the District's legal and social service providers respond to residents navigating complex and often urgent life circumstances. In all aspects of this work, we support the attorneys and advocates who serve on the front lines each day, assisting the individuals and families who depend on their expertise and dedication.

Today, we offer three additional observations to complement the perspectives shared by our civil legal justice partners.

### **The Access to Justice Initiative Works**

First, as the pro bono and public interest bar association in DC, we can offer a holistic view of civil justice in DC. From our distinct vantage point, we see how our network of legal and social service providers, government lawyers, and private-sector pro bono volunteers collaborate to advance justice and support our neighbors. The Access to Justice Initiative improves quality of life across District neighborhoods by strengthening economic stability, fostering community well-being, and enhancing public safety.

Through strategic investment in established civil legal services organizations, the Initiative supports housing stability along a comprehensive continuum of services. These efforts include preserving intergenerational homeownership, preventing foreclosures and evictions, and expanding access to affordable, discrimination-free housing opportunities. The Initiative further promotes economic mobility by funding programs that safeguard workers' rights, address debt-related legal crises, and equip residents with the knowledge and tools necessary for financial stability. In addition, the Initiative advances public safety and community resilience through targeted legal interventions, including services that assist survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, reduce recidivism, and provide critical support to at-risk youth.

Collectively, these investments strengthen families, stabilize neighborhoods, and contribute meaningfully to the District's broader economic and public safety objectives while lessening the government's burden when these issues go unaddressed.

### **Pro Bono Volunteers, Skills Training, and Community-Building Are Indispensable**

Second, while we are fortunate to have a robust legal services network in D.C., the legal need far outpaces their ability to respond. More knowledgeable and committed advocates are needed, while continuing to support the wonderful advocates we have. Through our work, we see how the Access to Justice Initiative sustains legal services lawyers and empowers pro bono volunteers to better serve D.C. residents. Leveraging our partnership with the DC Bar Foundation, we receive Access to Justice funding to support some of our training programs, foster community-building and collaboration among the public interest community, and strengthen the delivery of legal services to District residents.

- We host specific cohort trainings for housing and immigration lawyers, serving 52 lawyers in FY25.
- Our specialized leadership training for mid-level public interest lawyers helps ensure knowledgeable advocates can continue to serve clients while mentoring newer lawyers. There were 27 lawyers in the leadership cohort in FY25.
- We offer wide-ranging professional skills training for the entire community, led by experienced and well-respected litigators, through our Litigation Skills Series.

In FY 25 and the first part of FY26, we hosted 21 training sessions and educational programs, bringing 1,031 public-interest lawyers together to learn and improve their skills. In these ways, funding the Initiative ensures that legal services lawyers and pro bono volunteers get the comprehensive skills training and cross-organizational connections they need to serve our District's residents.

### **Loan Repayment Assistance Is A Critical Component**

Third, and finally, the Access to Justice Initiative plays a critical role in attracting and retaining the exceptional lawyers who are the backbone of the District's civil legal services system. Maintaining a highly skilled legal workforce—one with deep knowledge of the District's courts, agencies, and communities—is essential to ensuring effective representation for residents in need.

Programs such as the public student loan repayment assistance program, or LRAP, funded through the Initiative, are indispensable recruitment and retention tools. Many of our members consistently identify LRAP as a primary reason they can begin and sustain careers in public-interest law here in the District.

### **Conclusion**

The Access to Justice Initiative is integral to advancing the D.C. Council's commitment to improving the quality of life for residents throughout the District. Our most recent snapshot of civil legal needs in the District shows that more than 90% of litigants now appear in D.C. Superior Court without a lawyer.<sup>1</sup> The 2022 Legal Services Corporation (LSC) survey found that low-income Americans do not receive any or sufficient legal assistance for 92% of their substantial civil legal problems.<sup>2</sup> The Initiative is a critical component in addressing this inequality.

The Initiative is also cost-effective. As our partners at Legal Aid DC noted last year, local governments save between \$2.40 and \$6.24 for every dollar invested in providing legal

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<sup>1</sup> *Delivering Justice: Addressing Civil Legal Needs in the District of Columbia*, Access to Justice Commission (2023), <https://dcaccessjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Fact-Sheet-on-Pro-Se.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans*, Legal Services Corporation (2022), <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/resource/2022-justice-gap-report/>.

representation in eviction cases.<sup>3</sup> Further, last year’s Judiciary Committee report stated that “where residents are unable to access civil legal aid services, they are more likely to suffer long-term financial harms and be forced to rely on a broader range of social services offered by the District—services that are often far more expensive than civil legal aid.”

Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, your leadership is essential to ensuring that every District resident has meaningful access to civil legal services. This Committee’s sustained commitment to equal justice has made a tangible difference in the lives of individuals and families across our city, and Washington Council of Lawyers is deeply grateful for your work.

We respectfully ask that you continue that commitment by maintaining consistent funding for the Access to Justice Initiative. Your support makes it possible for residents to secure high-quality legal representation when they need it most—protecting their rights, preserving their stability, and strengthening communities throughout the District.

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<sup>3</sup> *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>.