



**Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Budget Oversight Hearing, May 6, 2026
Testimony in Support of Funding for the Access to Justice Initiative**

Submitted by:

April Frazier Camara
President & CEO, National Legal Aid & Defender Association
1901 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Chair Pinto and Members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding proposed cuts to civil legal services funding in the District of Columbia budget. My name is April Frazier Camara, and I am the President and CEO of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) and a Ward 7 resident.

I write today in strong opposition to the proposed 86 percent cut to the District's Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative funding. We urge the Council to fully restore funding for the Initiative to its FY26 level.

Statement of Interest

NLADA, founded in 1911, is America's oldest and largest national nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every person who enters a courtroom in America receives a fair shot at justice regardless of their zip code and income. NLADA champions effective legal assistance for people who cannot afford counsel, serves as a collective voice for both civil legal aid and public defense systems throughout the nation, and provides a wide range of services to support advocates for equal justice. We work to ensure federal funding for civil legal aid and public defense, and provide training and technical support to the field to improve both the quality and quantity of legal services in America. Through our Just Fund It campaign, we have been pushing Congress to maintain essential federally-funded services that clients of legal aid and public defense rely on.

NLADA has more than 700 organizations that collectively represent thousands of attorneys and advocates who provide civil legal aid and public defender services to low-income and underserved individuals in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Notably, NLADA also counts among its members and in its governance structures representatives from the client communities served by these providers, and who are most impacted by the access to justice crisis in this country.

Civil legal aid ensures that regardless of how much money a person has, they have the same level of access to a fair adjudication of their civil legal problems as anyone else. They provide legal help that enables people to protect their livelihoods, their health, and their families.



We work closely with the DC Access to Justice Initiative and its grantees to ensure that District residents can get legal help when they face moments of crisis. In addition to our interest in access-to-justice in all communities, we have a special interest in Washington, D.C. as we, ourselves, are members of this community, with our office located right here in the District.

The Critical Importance of Legal Aid Funding: What's at Stake

At stake are the lives and stability of thousands of District residents who rely on civil legal aid to remain housed, protect their families, secure income and health benefits, maintain employment, and escape violence. Legal aid organizations serve seniors, veterans, children and families, workers, tenants and homeowners, immigrants, and survivors of domestic violence—people who often face life-altering legal problems with no ability to afford counsel. These organizations would not be able to serve communities within the District without funding for the ATJ Initiative.

The DC Council created the ATJ Initiative 20 years ago to make sure that residents and communities across the District could have access to legal assistance, a key component in strong and safe neighborhoods. We are grateful for the support that Chair Pinto, past Chair Allen, and the Council have shown for legal aid and the ATJ Initiative over the past two decades. In FY2025, the ATJ Initiative funded more than 30 nonprofits that served over 44,000 DC residents, collaborated with more than 180 community partners, and worked across all eight Wards. These essential services, at current scale and scope, will not be possible if the proposed cuts to the ATJ Initiative are enacted.

The need for civil legal assistance is already overwhelming. The Legal Services Corporation's (LSC) most recent national Justice Gap study found that low-income Americans do not receive sufficient ¹₂

These proposed cuts to the ATJ Initiative would dramatically worsen that justice gap in the District.

Individuals, Families, Communities, and Court Systems Benefit from Legal Aid

Legal aid provides a guiding hand through court systems that are, to a layperson, technically nuanced at best and often incomprehensible. For example, this assistance is especially significant in housing court. Research consistently demonstrates that tenants with legal representation are substantially more likely to avoid eviction, preserve housing stability, and reach negotiated resolutions that prevent displacement. Research on New York City's right-to-counsel program found that when tenants had lawyers, they were substantially less likely to be evicted and less likely to face eviction warrants or adverse housing judgments.³ Evictions carry enormous downstream costs for communities and governments, including increased homelessness, shelter use, school instability for children, and negative health outcomes.

¹ LEGAL SERVS. CORP., THE JUSTICE GAP: THE UNMET CIVIL LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AMERICANS (2022), <https://justicegap.lsc.gov>.

² *Id.*

³ Mike Cassidy & Janet Currie, *The Effects of Legal Representation on Tenant Outcomes in Housing Court: Evidence from New York City's Universal Access Program*, 222 J. PUB. ECON. 104844 (2023), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S00472723000269?ref=pdf_download&fr=RR-2&rr=9f510ff4cd3222cf.



The impact of legal aid is felt not just in housing: having access to an attorney provides a meaningful difference no matter what your type of legal problem a person might have.⁴ For example, a U.S. Department of Justice-funded study found that survivors of physical domestic violence who received civil legal services were significantly less likely to experience repeat victimization over both the short and long term.⁵

Notably, legal aid secures stability not just for individuals and families, but for society writ large. Each year, members of NLADA's Corporate Advisory Committee join together more than 100 general counsel and chief legal officers of some of America's largest corporations on a letter to Congress conveying the importance of funding civil legal services because of the role it plays in supporting a thriving economy and workforce.⁶

Furthermore, legal aid reduces entanglement in the criminal legal system. For example, one ATJ Initiative grantee representing youth in the juvenile justice system reduced its clients' likelihood of rearrest by 38% compared with other youth committed to DYRS. Another ATJ Initiative grantee that works on sealing criminal records – handling 618 such cases in FY2025 – is reducing recidivism among its clients and increasing their economic opportunity.

Civil legal aid is not simply a human service; it is an essential part of the justice system's infrastructure. Legal aid attorneys help courts function more effectively and efficiently. Attorneys narrow legal disputes, prepare accurate filings, facilitate settlements, and help ensure compliance with court procedures and orders. Without representation, courts face increased delays and administrative burdens as unrepresented litigants attempt to navigate highly complex legal systems on their own.

Legal aid organizations also play a critical role in mobilizing and supporting pro bono legal services. These organizations recruit, train, mentor, and supervise private attorneys who volunteer their time to represent low-income residents. Without the infrastructure and expertise provided by legal aid organizations, much of this pro bono capacity cannot function effectively. Cuts to legal aid funding therefore undermine not only direct representation services, but also the broader volunteer legal network that depends on legal aid organizations for training, case placement, and supervision.

The proposed reductions would also have severe institutional consequences for legal aid organizations themselves. Funding cuts of this magnitude would likely result in staff layoffs, office closures, reduced intake capacity, and the elimination of critical practice areas. Legal aid organizations are already forced to turn away eligible clients facing urgent legal crises due to a lack of resources. Once legal aid offices or organizations are closed, it requires a greater investment to re-initiate services for those communities,

⁴ See, e.g., Rebecca L. Sandefur, *The Impact of Counsel: An Analysis of Empirical Evidence*, SEATTLE J. SOC. JUST. vol. 9, iss. 1 (Fall/Winter 2010), <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=sjsj> (finding that a positive case outcome was between 1.19 and 13.79 times more likely when a person had legal assistance).

⁵ CAROLYN COPPS HARTLEY & LYNETTE M. RENNER, *THE LONGER-TERM INFLUENCE OF CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES ON BATTERED WOMEN* (2016), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249879.pdf>.

⁶ *Corporate Advocacy on Behalf of Access to Justice*, NAT'L LEGAL AID & DEF. ASS'N (accessed May 4, 2026), <https://www.nlada.org/node/32031>; see also *Corporate Engagement*, NAT'L LEGAL AID & DEF. ASS'N (accessed May 4, 2026), <https://www.nlada.org/issues-and-initiatives/corporate-engagement>.



because of up-front physical infrastructure and startup staffing costs that a new organization would require, resurfacing the problem of inadequate funding but with greater urgency. Cuts such as the ones proposed would turn an already dire situation into a full-blown crisis.

Investment in Legal Aid Yields Multifold Returns

Civil legal aid also produces measurable economic returns on investment. Studies conducted in multiple states have found that investments in legal aid generate significant economic benefits through reduced reliance on emergency services, prevention of homelessness, preservation of federal benefits flowing into local economies, and reduced burdens on courts and social service systems. LSC examined over 50 studies of legal aid and found that in each and every study, the data proved that investments in legal aid paid for themselves many times over. In fact, on average, for every dollar spent on civil legal aid, jurisdictions see a return of \$7.⁷ Looking at our neighbors in the DMV region, recent studies found that every \$1 invested in legal aid returns \$12.92 in Maryland and \$7.34 in Virginia⁸

This return on investment comes in the form of direct returns to individuals, families, and taxpayers, as well as indirect benefits to the community and local economy. For example, legal aid:

- Prevents loss by avoiding wrongful evictions, foreclosures, and unfair debt collection, while also securing protective orders, safe housing, and financial support for survivors of domestic violence.
- Produces direct financial benefits for individuals and families by securing unpaid wages, veterans' benefits, child support, Social Security payments, and record sealing.
- Saves taxpayer dollars by resolving issues before they require government intervention, thus lowering costs for emergency shelters, healthcare, social services, emergency financial assistance, and law enforcement.
- Fuels local economies by saving individuals and families money that then circulates through local businesses, increasing spending, job retention, and overall economic stability through the economic multiplier effect.⁹

Indeed, the ATJ Initiative has also seen substantial returns on investment. For example:

- The Children's Law Center's work on housing conditions for children with asthma saved three dollars for every one dollar spent on legal services, totaling over fourteen million dollars in total.
- Legal Counsel for the Elderly generated 1.78 million dollars for its clients from Initiative funding of about 305,000 dollars, producing a 581 percent return on investment.
- Legal Aid DC secured more than twelve million dollars in financial benefits for its clients by helping residents with foreclosure and debt collection cases.

⁷ LEGAL SERVS. CORP., THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID (2025), <https://www.lsc.gov/our-impact/economic-impact>.

⁸ J. BYRNES, MARYLAND LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION: SOCIAL ECONOMIC IMPACT AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT ANALYSIS OF THE FUNDING PROVIDED FOR LEGAL AID SERVICES IN THE STATE OF MARYLAND (2023); THE RESOURCE FOR GREAT PROGRAMS, INC., REPORT TO THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE WORK OF VIRGINIA'S LEGAL AID PROGRAMS (2021).

⁹ LEGAL SERVS. CORP., THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID (2025), <https://www.lsc.gov/our-impact/economic-impact>.



When it comes to funding legal aid, the question is not whether or not we want to pay. Instead, the question is whether we want to pay \$1 today and uphold the principles of equal justice enshrined in our founding documents or whether we want to abandon those principles and pay \$7 tomorrow.

Funding from the District is a Key and Necessary Component

Importantly, there is no realistic alternative funding source available to absorb losses caused by cuts in District support. As a national organization continually engaged in federal advocacy on legal aid, NLADA stresses that federal legal aid funding remains unstable, prone to cuts, and subject to ever-narrowing eligibility criteria. Just one legal aid organization in the District receives funding from the federal Legal Services Corporation, the single largest funder of legal aid in the country. Notably, LSC itself received a 3.8% cut from FY25 to FY26, and it faces the prospect of a much deeper cut for FY27. The White House Budget for FY27 calls for the outright elimination of LSC, and the House Appropriations Committee proposed cutting LSC's budget by more than half. Philanthropic funding alone cannot sustain the scale of services required to meet community need. Furthermore, the responsibility to support legal aid in DC does not rest with the federal government or private funders: the Council is responsible. The District's investment is therefore indispensable to maintaining a functioning civil legal aid system.

These proposed cuts come at an especially dangerous moment. District residents continue to face rising housing costs and economic instability, while proposed policy changes affecting public benefits and tenant protections will increase the need for legal assistance even further. Reducing access to legal aid in this environment will deepen inequities and leave vulnerable residents without meaningful access to justice. If the Council does not fund the ATJ Initiative, DC residents will be forced to go without legal aid.

Conclusion

Access to justice is not a luxury. It is a core component of a fair and functioning democracy. When people cannot enforce their rights, defend their homes, protect their families, or access benefits to which they are legally entitled, the promise of equal justice under law becomes meaningless.

The Council now faces a critical decision. To conclude, the Council now faces a critical decision. The catastrophic cuts that the federal government has enacted since January 2025 present an opportunity for state and local governments to show where their values are. Who do we care about here? An 86 percent reduction in funding for civil legal services would not simply reduce programs at the margins. It would destabilize the civil legal aid system across the District and leave countless residents without help in moments of profound crisis. These crises would then necessitate the need for additional emergency services. Typically the populations receiving legal aid in DC have been Black and People of Color, but the face of legal aid is changing, now including the huge number of federal employees who lost their jobs since January 2025 and are now eligible for legal aid.

We respectfully urge the Council to reject the proposed reductions and fully restore civil legal services funding to its FY26 level.



Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to access to justice for District residents.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Camara". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and a long, sweeping tail.

April Frazier Camara
President & CEO
National Legal Aid & Defender Association

