



Boston
Bar Association

Massachusetts
Bar Association

Attleboro Area Bar
Association

Berkshire County
Bar Association

Bristol County
Bar Association

Franklin County
Bar Association

Greater Lynn
Bar Association

Hampden County
Bar Association

Hampshire County
Bar Association

Massachusetts Academy of
Trial Attorneys

Massachusetts Chapter of
the National Academy of
Elder Law

Massachusetts
Employment Lawyers
Association

Massachusetts LGBTQ
Bar Association

National
Lawyers Guild

New Bedford
Bar Association

New England Muslim
Bar Association

The Real Estate
Bar Association
For Massachusetts

Women's Bar Association

Worcester County Bar
Association

South Asian Bar
Association of Greater
Boston

December 2, 2016

His Excellency Charles D. Baker, Jr.
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House, Room 280
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Re: Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), line item 0321-1600
FY 18 budget request of \$23 million

Dear Governor Baker:

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition, a collaboration of bar associations and private attorneys, I write to you in strong support of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) request for \$23 million in funding to provide civil legal assistance for low-income residents of the Commonwealth in line item 0321-1600. This represents a critically needed \$5 million increase in funding. We are grateful for the \$1 million increase for civil legal aid you approved last year.

Those additional funds enabled civil legal aid programs across the state to provide legal advice and representation for more low-income residents facing critical non-criminal legal issues. Thanks to the state's investment in civil legal aid, elders and other individuals facing life-threatening conditions received crucial health care, hardworking employees remained at work, families stayed in their homes, and survivors of domestic violence and other forms of abuse accessed vital protections and services. Interventions like these make our communities stronger by protecting the wellbeing of our Commonwealth's most vulnerable residents.

While civil legal aid programs in Massachusetts assisted more than 88,000 residents in FY16, too many people are still unable to obtain legal services. Nearly one million residents are eligible for civil legal assistance, yet the Boston Bar Association (BBA) Statewide Task Force to Expand Civil Legal Aid in Massachusetts found that, due to lack of funding, civil legal aid programs must **turn away 64% of eligible clients who seek help** (<http://www.bostonbar.org/public-policy/civil-legal-aid-in-ma>). Those turned away must attempt to resolve their legal issues alone, which often leads to disastrous consequences for their safety, their livelihood, and their health.

This disparity between the funding and the need for civil legal aid also strains our legal system. The overwhelming need for legal advice and representation for low-income people slows down the courts and increases court staff time spent assisting unrepresented parties. The Boston Bar Association and the Massachusetts Bar Association are integral partners in the Equal Justice Coalition precisely because civil legal aid is critical to creating a fair and effective legal system. Last year, over 600 attorneys participated in the Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid, an advocacy day at the State House organized by the Equal Justice

The Equal Justice Coalition

Louis Tompros, Chair • Laura Booth, Director

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Coalition. This event highlighted the legal community's steadfast support for civil legal aid and equal justice for all.

The appropriation for civil legal aid presents Massachusetts with an opportunity to use state funds on a system proven effective at protecting our state's most vulnerable residents while delivering a strong economic benefit to the state. As the BBA Task Force's 2014 report clearly demonstrated, **every dollar invested in civil legal aid returns between two and five dollars to the state and its residents through avoided emergency costs and recovered federal benefits.** Civil legal aid not only improves the lives of individuals and families in need, it is also a smart fiscal decision.

Civil legal aid is a powerful tool that helps our Commonwealth move ever closer to the goal of equal access to the legal system for all people. Civil legal aid also indirectly benefits all of our state's residents, enhancing the stability of our workforce for business, improving the efficiency of our court system, and creating strong and vital communities that are the heart of the Massachusetts economy. **We strongly urge you to make an investment in civil legal aid and support an additional \$5 million for MLAC, for a total appropriation of \$23 million, in your FY18 budget recommendations.**

Thank you for your past support of civil legal aid. We look forward to continue working with you to make Massachusetts a place where all residents can thrive.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis W. Tompros". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Louis W. Tompros
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition

CC:

Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito
The Honorable Ralph D. Gants
Lon Povich, Chief Legal Counsel
Secretary Kristen Lepore
Secretary Marylou Sudders
Secretary Jay Ash

Secretary Ronald Walker III
Robert Ross, General Counsel of A&F
Steve Kadish, Chief of Staff
Elizabeth Mahoney, Policy Director
Ryan Coleman, Legislative Affairs Director