

18 December 2017

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

Re: Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, line item 0321-1600
FY19 Budget Request of \$23 million

Dear Governor Baker:

Thank you for your continued support for state funding for civil legal aid. As managing partners of prominent Massachusetts law firms, we recognize the vital role of civil legal aid in providing low-income residents with the legal help they need to resolve complex problems related to housing, domestic violence, employment, immigration and other concerns. We also know that investing in legal aid yields significant benefits for taxpayers and for all individuals who use the courts. For these reasons, we urge you to increase funding for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), line item 0321-1600, by \$5 million for FY19, for a total appropriation of \$23 million.

Civil legal aid programs in Massachusetts are severely underfunded. Programs serve residents with annual incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level (\$30,750 for a family of four), but due to lack of resources, 65% of eligible people that seek assistance are turned away. This means that each year, programs are unable to serve 45,000 residents with serious legal issues, leaving them to navigate the court system alone.

As lawyers, we know how difficult it is for someone without a legal background to represent themselves in court. Unrepresented litigants often fail to make their case, causing them to lose their homes, their jobs, or the benefits on which their families rely. Moreover, we see how lack of representation leads to inefficiencies in the courtroom by slowing down procedures, consuming court staff time, and resulting in improperly presented evidence or repeat filings. Close to 90% of Massachusetts trial court judges surveyed by the BBA's Task Force to Expand Civil Legal Aid in Massachusetts reported that the high volume of *pro se* litigants hinders court functioning. This is a problem for all those who use Massachusetts courts, not simply the unrepresented litigants.

Threats to federal funding for civil legal aid amplify the need for increased investment at the state level. Massachusetts legal aid programs receive more than \$10 million from the federal government, or 21% of all legal aid funding in the state, and there is substantial risk that this funding will be eliminated by the current administration. Without federal funding, the capacity of legal aid programs would be drastically reduced, exacerbating the current crisis.

The private bar maintains a strong commitment to increasing access to justice and is eager to help address the overwhelming need for civil legal aid. In FY17, law firms in Massachusetts donated 46,048 hours of pro bono service to low-income people through their work with MLAC-funded programs. This donated time is equivalent to the work of 24 full-time staff attorneys and allowed programs to handle an additional 3,334 cases. Private attorneys also assisted low-income clients through Mass Legal Answers Online, an

innovative website that allows eligible residents to receive free answers to their legal questions. Since the website's launch in November 2016, volunteer attorneys have answered over 1,200 questions concerning housing, family law, consumer law, and other issues.

We recognize that there are many underfunded programs and that the budget is limited, but civil legal aid is well worth the investment. The work of MLAC-funded programs saves the state money by helping low-income people with housing and domestic violence issues, preventing them from needing emergency shelter, medical care and mental health care paid for by the state. Legal aid programs also boost the economy by obtaining federal revenue in the form of nutrition benefits, disability benefits, and Medicare coverage for low-income clients. In FY16, the advocacy of MLAC-funded programs yielded a return of \$49.3 million to the state and its residents, an amount that far exceeds the state's \$17 million investment in legal aid that year.

As leaders of the private bar, we once again urge you to fund MLAC at \$23 million for FY19. The Commonwealth and the country have a responsibility to ensure justice for all, and with increased investment in legal aid, we'll move closer towards making that promise a reality.

Thank you for your leadership and support.

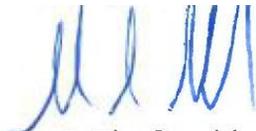
Sincerely,



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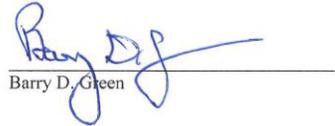


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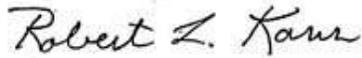
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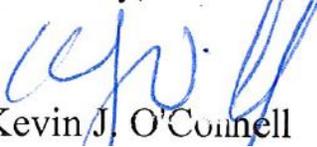
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