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February 5, 2018

Senate President Harriette Chandler  
State House Room 333  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Re: FY19 Budget Request of \$23 million for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance  
Corporation, Line Item 0321-1600

Senate President Chandler,

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC), I write in strong support of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation's request for a \$5 million increase in funding, for a total of \$23 million through line item 0321-1600 (MLAC). We are grateful that the Senate supported an increase in funding during the FY18 budget process, and we appreciate your long-standing support for civil legal aid. Unfortunately, that increase did not survive in the final FY18 budget. We are hopeful that this year we will successfully secure this \$5 million increase in critical funding, especially given the current positive revenue collections.

Without the right to an attorney in civil cases or the financial means to hire one, low-income individuals and families turn to civil legal aid programs to help them resolve problems related to domestic violence, housing, health care, immigration, protection of elders, and other issues that threaten their safety and well-being. In FY17, MLAC-funded programs closed more than 22,900 cases, assisting 83,884 individuals and their families. Unfortunately, persistent funding shortages and increasing demand for services force these programs to turn away nearly 45,000 eligible people who seek help each year (people with an income below 125% of the federal poverty level—which is \$31,750 for a family of four—are eligible). Not having legal help often leads to devastating outcomes for these individuals and their family members, a total of over 100,000 people across the state. MLAC-funded civil legal aid programs could hire 45 additional staff members and help an additional 7,732 people in need if provided with a \$5 million increase in funding.

The principle of equal justice under law—the idea that anyone, no matter their income, can make their case and receive a just result—is a fundamental principle in Massachusetts and the legal community. On January 25, more than 600 hundred attorneys, advocates, and law students from firms, organizations, and law schools across the state attended the Walk to the Hill at the State House to demonstrate the legal community's overwhelming support for the civil legal aid programs that help make this principle a reality. At the Walk to the Hill, Danielle, the mother of a young girl with sickle cell anemia, described how Greater Boston Legal Services worked faithfully with her and her daughter through the more than seven years of applications and appeals that were necessary before obtaining the Supplemental Security Income benefits her daughter was eligible for. These benefits provide life-

saving medical services and financial stability for her daughter. Danielle's story illustrates how legal aid changes lives and reminds us that more state funding for legal aid is necessary if we are to fulfill the promise of equal justice for all.

Civil legal aid is an investment in the future of the Commonwealth. It provided an economic benefit of \$59.2 million to the Massachusetts in FY17, including federal benefits and other financial support for low-income residents, as well as shelter and health care cost savings for the state. Civil legal aid promotes strong, prosperous communities. Emerging challenges like changes in federal immigration policy that threaten employment and family stability, the resettlement of people affected by Hurricane Maria and other disasters, and the continuing opioid crisis often require civil legal solutions. In the last year, MLAC-funded programs were invaluable in the state's response to these challenges. Meanwhile, the clear benefits of civil legal aid—like preventing economic instability and ensuring the court system functions more effectively for all litigants—support all residents, not just those that legal aid affects directly.

Once again, we urge you to provide \$23 million in funding for civil legal aid through line item 0321-1600 (MLAC) in the FY19 budget. Thank you for your leadership and for all that you do for the people of Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Tompros", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Louis Tompros  
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition