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Gov. Patrick, Justice Ireland Join Appeal for Civil Legal Aid Funding
Walk to the Hill 2013 Brings More Than 650 Attorneys to the State House

BOSTON (January 30, 2013) – In a speech at the State House’s Great Hall this morning, Governor Deval Patrick addressed more than 650 lawyers who gathered to participate in the 14th annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid. Gov. Patrick asked participants to urge their legislators to support increased state funding for civil legal aid.

“Start the conversation with the importance of investing in ourselves,” Gov. Patrick told the audience. “We need new, fresh resources from our citizens in order to deliver a range of services that make our Commonwealth better.”

The Governor’s remarks come one week after he recommended \$15.5 million for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) in his fiscal year 2014 budget proposal. MLAC, which is the largest single funding source for civil legal aid in Massachusetts, received a \$12 million appropriation from the state this fiscal year.

Chief Justice Roderick Ireland of the Supreme Judicial Court joined the Governor at the podium to support increased funding.

“We are here today to help balance the scales of justice,” Justice Ireland told the audience. “By speaking up for increased funding for civil legal aid today you are helping to make sure that the promise of equal justice for all is kept.”

The goal of this year’s Walk to the Hill is to increase state funding for organizations that provide advice and representation to low-income residents facing critical civil legal problems such as eviction and foreclosure, child custody and support issues, denial of health care coverage, unemployment benefits appeals, domestic violence and elder abuse. Programs have been struggling to meet demand due to a 78 percent decrease in revenue since FY08 from the Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program, the other major funding source for civil legal aid. MLAC has cut grants to the 16 legal aid programs it funds by 56 percent since FY08.

“We are honored to have Gov. Patrick’s leadership in the effort to strengthen civil legal aid,” said Lonnie Powers, MLAC’s executive director. “Increased funding will result in economic benefits to our Commonwealth, which receives tens of millions of dollars every year in federal benefits and cost savings won by legal aid attorneys on behalf of their clients.” Powers said MLAC’s request for FY14 matches Gov. Patrick’s recommendation of \$15.5 million.

The Walk was co-sponsored by the Equal Justice Coalition, Boston Bar Association, Massachusetts Bar Association and many local and specialty bar associations. Attorneys from more than 50 Boston-area law firms and organizations participated.

The speaking program also featured Massachusetts Bar Association President Robert L. Holloway, Jr. and Boston Bar Association President James D. Smeallie, who both called on the legislature to increase state funding for civil legal aid.

“Legal service organizations across the state cannot meet the needs of Bay State residents in need of legal help. The combination of severe cuts in IOLTA funding and the ever increasing number of new cases means many desperate families are being turned away,” Holloway said. “This heart-breaking reality is what we must keep in mind as we implore the Legislature for additional funding.”

“Our system of legal aid in Massachusetts relies heavily on revenues produced through interest on IOLTA accounts,” said Smeallie. “Because of the uncertain economy, such funding has been at its lowest when the need is the greatest. Thus, it is critical that the state step in to increase funding for civil legal services to assure access to justice for our citizens who are most in need of it.”

The final speaker was Daniele Bien-Aime of Brockton, a former client of South Coastal Counties Legal Services. Bien-Aime recounted how she lost her job, health insurance, and nearly became homeless during a harrowing battle with breast cancer. Thanks to the advocacy of a legal aid attorney, Daniele was able to get her job back, providing her with health insurance to finish her cancer treatment and the income she needed to pay her bills and keep her family off the street.

“My legal aid attorney was Heaven-sent,” said Bien-Amie. “I don’t know what I would have done without her help, and I am grateful to everyone who supports the funding that enables these lawyers to continue to help people like me.”

The hundreds of lawyers who participate in Walk to the Hill have no direct stake in civil legal aid funding. However, according to Sandy Moskowitz, a shareholder at the Boston law firm Davis Malm & D’Agostine and chair of the Equal Justice Coalition, they understand the need for additional funding to protect civil legal aid’s critical role in ensuring access to justice.

“Legal aid programs throughout the Commonwealth have faced severely reduced funding and have been forced to take drastic steps to cut back, including laying off on average a third of their staffs,” Moskowitz said. “Only additional state funding can protect our civil legal aid system and access to justice for our most vulnerable residents.”

About the Equal Justice Coalition

The Equal Justice Coalition, a collaboration of the Boston Bar Association, Massachusetts Bar Association and the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, works to increase state funding for civil legal aid. For more information, visit www.equaljusticecoalition.org.

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