

LOUIS TOMPROS WALK TO THE HILL WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome to the 19th Annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid!

My name is Louis Tompros, and I am the Chair of the Equal Justice Coalition.

I'm going to start us off today in a somewhat unconventional way. We're going to start today off with some lawyer jokes.

Q. What's the difference between a lawyer and a vulture?

A. The lawyer gets frequent flyer miles.

Q. What's the difference between a jellyfish and a lawyer?

A. One's a spineless, poisonous blob. The other is a form of sea life.

And my favorite:

Q. What's the difference between a lawyer and a leech?

A. After you die, a leech stops sucking your blood.

Ouch, right?

What's the point? The point is that in our culture, lawyers have something less than a sterling reputation.

And here is my worry. I worry that some of us have internalized that.

Some of us have heard so many lawyer jokes—and seen so many portrayals of lawyers as greedy, ruthless, nasty, mean, and untruthful—that even we lawyers start to think of lawyers as the bad guys.

But let me ask you this:

When victims of domestic violence need a restraining order to stop the abuse, who do they turn to? To lawyers.

When veterans come home from deployment with post-traumatic stress disorder, who makes sure they aren't wrongly denied the benefits they deserve or the care they need? Lawyers do.

When the people who sought refuge in Massachusetts after the devastation of Hurricane Maria needed access to schools and services, who made it happen? Lawyers.

And just one year ago, when thousands of people coming into the country were unconstitutionally stopped at the borders, who showed up at Logan Airport and airports across the country—laptops and notepads in

hand—and filed petition after petition to get people reunited with their families? The lawyers did.

Lawyers are an extraordinary force for good. Lawyers aren't the bad guys. Lawyers are the heroes.

Everyone who is facing a life-changing legal threat—denial of health benefits, eviction, abuse, deportation—no matter how much money they make—deserves to have a hero on their side.

Here in Massachusetts, some of our most selfless hero lawyers are the legal aid lawyers that work for the programs that receive funding through MLAC, the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation.

These are the lawyers who serve the most vulnerable. People who are eligible for civil legal aid are those at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level—in other words, in Massachusetts, people with incomes at or below \$30,750 for a family of four.

Last year, MLAC programs handled 22,911 cases, helping over 83,000 low-income people across Massachusetts. The lawyers at these

programs who serve our most vulnerable neighbors are absolute superheroes, and they deserve our thanks—so let's give them a huge round of applause.

And yet, their extraordinary work is not enough to meet the need. More than 60% of eligible Massachusetts residents who need a lawyer and who qualify for civil legal aid are nonetheless turned away, because there just is not enough funding for legal aid organizations to meet the need.

And that is why we are here today. Last year, the Legislature held funding for civil legal aid flat. While we're of course grateful for every penny, level funding or small increases are just not enough to meet the existing and ever increasing need.

That's why we are asking the Legislature to increase funding for civil legal aid by \$5 million this year. That increase would allow legal aid programs to handle another 3,000 cases statewide, helping an estimated additional 7,700 residents of Massachusetts with their most serious legal problems.

So what are we asking you to do?

First of all, we are glad you are here. The Walk to the Hill is one of the largest gatherings at the statehouse every year. As one legislator—whose anonymity I will protect—told me, “The Walk to the Hill group certainly is big and loud.” Your “big and loud” presence here is critical, and it has not gone unnoticed.

Second, over the next few minutes, I invite you to listen to and be inspired by what our bar association leaders, the clients and lawyers from our programs, and our Chief Justice all have to say about how important civil legal aid is.

But third—and perhaps most importantly—it is absolutely critical that, when we conclude here, you actually go and visit your state representatives and senators today. Now, I know this can be intimidating. And I’ll confess to you—the first time I came to the Walk, I stayed for the speeches, I grabbed the lunch, and snuck out without ever showing up at a legislative office. But it is crucial that you make those visits.

Your representatives want to hear from you, and they need to know how important funding for civil legal aid is. They need to be reminded that there is an extraordinary unmet need, and they need to be reminded that lawyers—especially legal aid lawyers—are heroes.

So go to your representative's office! Bring a friend. Introduce yourself and shake hands with your legislator or their aide. Heck, take a selfie and tweet it out! Who knows, you could go viral...

But the most important thing is for you to express your support. Legal aid lawyers are heroes, and legal aid changes lives. We're counting on every one of you to make sure that every official in this building knows that—and remembers it—when it comes time to cast a vote for funding for MLAC.

And I now have the distinct privilege of introducing another lawyer who is an absolute hero, the Honorable Ralph Gants, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.