

WALK TO THE HILL: BBA President Mark Smith
JANUARY 25, 2018

- Thanks, as always, to the EJC for putting on this event every year and to Chris Sullivan and the MBA for their partnership and support.
- And thanks to all of you for coming to the State House and joining us in our campaign for civil legal-aid funding.
- In 2014, the BBA's Statewide Task Force to Expand Civil Legal Aid released a report which revealed just how great the need for civil legal services was in the Commonwealth. That report showed that nearly two-thirds of otherwise eligible low-income residents in Massachusetts were turned away from legal help, because legal service organizations lacked the resources. And this, of course, doesn't even account for those who faced a legal problem but never sought legal help
- Since the release of the report, Governor Baker and the Legislature have shown they, too, understand the importance of civil legal aid by increasing funding for MLAC by 20%, even as overall spending has grown at a much slower rate. We are proud and thankful for their leadership on this front.
- Unfortunately, the need for aid has also continued to rise, and still roughly 45,000 eligible Massachusetts residents are turned away each year. Plus, given recent developments at the federal level, including changes to immigration policies, cuts to antipoverty programs, and threats to end federal funding for legal aid, the need for state legal aid is growing and will likely continue to grow. And of course, the stakes are huge: when one is unable to access legal services, the consequences can be devastating, including loss of child custody or child support, housing and shelter, health care and employment.
- A core piece of the BBA's mission is to facilitate access to justice, and our members -- like Massachusetts lawyers, generally -- devote a great deal of time and energy to pro bono efforts, which we support through regular trainings and education at the BBA. As important as pro bono efforts are, however, they will never be enough to bridge the justice gap, and an increase in state funding is crucial to achieving equal access to justice in the Commonwealth.
- Increasing funding, and access, to civil legal aid however, is not only the right thing to do to ensure a just society, it's also a key part of ensuring a vibrant economy. That same BBA Report which revealed the great need for legal aid, also showed it was a smart investment that actually saved the state money: for every \$1 spent on civil legal aid, the state saves between \$2 and \$5.
- Because the BBA champions access to justice, and because we know it's a good investment, we continue to advocate for civil legal aid. Our report recommended a \$30 million increase, over time. But for this year, given current fiscal constraints and uncertainties, we support MLAC's request for a \$5 million increase in funding. And we're ready to share with legislators, and others, why civil legal aid matters to the bar, and the public, and why adequate funding is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do.
- Thank you.