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December 5, 2017

His Excellency Charlie Baker
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House Room 280
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

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

Governor Baker,

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC), thank you for supporting the \$18 million appropriation for civil legal aid through the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC, line item 0321-1600) in the FY18 budget. We are grateful that you recognize the importance of civil legal aid to the Commonwealth. We realize that the state budget picture makes it difficult to meet the funding requests of all programs, but the demand for civil legal aid is overwhelming and more resources are desperately needed to ensure low-income people receive equal access to justice. **We urge you to provide \$23 million in funding for MLAC in the FY19 budget.**

Civil legal aid provides stability to individuals, families, and communities. In FY17, MLAC-funded programs closed more than 22,900 cases, assisting 83,213 clients and family members resolve problems related to housing, health care, immigration, protection of elders, domestic violence, and other issues that threatened their safety and wellbeing. 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. This often leads to devastating, and sometimes life-threatening, outcomes for these individuals, their household and their family members—negatively affecting over 100,000 people across the state.

To make matters worse, changes in federal policies and funding cuts to anti-poverty programs have increased the civil legal needs of low-income people and the elderly, while simultaneously making it more difficult for our civil legal aid programs to address those needs. Dramatic shifts in federal immigration policy, for example, increase both the need for direct legal representation and also the demand for accurate information on immigrants' rights and responsibilities in affected communities. The proposed reduction in funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) would force MLAC-funded programs that rely on LSC and other federal funding to work with even fewer resources in their efforts to assist our state's most vulnerable residents. A \$5 million increase in state funding for civil legal aid would enable programs to hire 31 additional attorneys, 8 additional paralegals, and 6 support staff, and help 7,732 more people in need. To fulfill its promise of justice for all, the Commonwealth must provide adequate funding for civil legal aid.

Civil legal aid helps people like Anna. Anna, now seven, has struggled with severe complications of sickle cell disease her whole life, experiencing several life-threatening medical crises. She is treated regularly in a hematology clinic, and has visited the emergency department on dozens of occasions for pain, fever, and dangerous infections. Anna's health issues made it hard for her mother to maintain steady employment. When Anna was a baby, her mother applied for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) so she could

The Equal Justice Coalition

Louis Tompros, Chair • Laura Booth, Director

7 Winthrop Square, 2nd Floor • Boston, MA 02110 • www.equaljusticecoalition.org

dedicate herself to caring for her daughter. With help from Greater Boston Legal Services' Children's Disability Project, Anna's mother fought for these critical benefits through years of denials, appeals, and roadblocks. Seven years after the initial application, Anna's mother won access to the support Anna so desperately needed. GBLS' years of advocacy have uplifted Anna's entire family, and the experience inspired her mother to go to school for social work to help families struggling with similar issues. Anna is happy at school, and her mother is now a licensed social worker.

Civil legal aid continues to be a responsible investment, helping low-income residents access federal benefits and other financial supports, and saving the state money on shelter, health care, and emergency costs by resolving civil legal issues before they become crises. In FY16, the work of MLAC-funded programs provided an overall economic benefit of more than \$49 million to the Commonwealth and its residents, including more than \$12 million in cost savings for the state. By increasing access to justice, Massachusetts will help those in need and save money.

Beyond this direct economic benefit, 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 proved themselves invaluable in the state's response to these challenges. Meanwhile, longstanding advantages of civil legal aid—like helping employees remain focused on their jobs and allowing the court system to function more effectively for all litigants—benefit all residents, not just those that legal aid affects directly.

We look forward to working together to ensure that all people can access justice, regardless of income. Once again, we urge you to provide \$23 million in funding for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation for FY19. 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". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Louis Tompros
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition

CC:

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