



December 21, 2018

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

**Re: Civil Legal Aid Funding, Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, line item 0321-1600**

Dear Governor Baker:

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition, thank you for your leadership, and thank you for supporting civil legal aid in the Commonwealth. We are deeply grateful that you approved a funding increase for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation in the FY19 Budget, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to improve access to justice for low-income residents of Massachusetts.

Civil legal aid provides vital protection to low-income individuals and families, older adults, and people with disabilities as they face civil legal issues related to health care, immigration, domestic violence, housing, and education, among other concerns. The funding increase that you approved for FY19 allows legal aid organizations to help more people in need, which protects the rights of individuals, strengthens communities, and delivers an economic benefit to the Commonwealth and its residents. Unfortunately, even with this increase, civil legal aid organizations in Massachusetts do not have adequate resources to help the majority of people in need. Due to lack of funding, legal aid organizations are forced to turn away 65 percent of eligible residents—nearly 45,000 people each year—who seek help. To begin to address this disparity in access to justice, the Equal Justice Coalition strongly supports the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation's request for \$26 million in the FY20 Budget, and we urge you to include this amount in your FY20 budget recommendations.

Increasing funding for legal aid is compassionate *and* fiscally sound. According to MLAC's latest Economic Benefits Report, in FY18, the work of civil legal aid provided an economic benefit of \$60.5 million to the Commonwealth and its residents, including \$20.2 million in savings for the state on emergency costs related to homelessness and domestic violence prevention, \$6.3 million in new federal revenue entering the Commonwealth, and \$40.2 million in benefits and savings for low-income Massachusetts residents, which is then spent in local economies. These economic benefits far outpace MLAC's appropriation; legal aid more than pays for itself, and these benefits grow as state investment in legal aid increases. Legal aid presents Massachusetts with an opportunity to save money while improving the lives of its residents, and we urge you to continue to support this wise investment.

Without legal aid—and because there is no right to an attorney in most civil cases—low-income residents must face the court system alone, making them much less likely to achieve a successful outcome, and more likely to suffer economic and other consequences for themselves, their families, and their communities. Civil legal aid acts as a form of preventive care, helping people avoid instability and crises caused by civil legal issues before they spiral out of control. It is essential—for the well-being of the individual and for the fiscal health of the Commonwealth—to resolve these issues before they become emergencies. MLAC-funded organizations closed 22,239 cases in FY18, benefitting over 95,000 clients and family members. From helping survivors of domestic violence gain the protections they need, to educating immigrant families on their rights and responsibilities, to ensuring that older adults and people with disabilities can receive life-changing medical care, access to legal advice and representation is indispensable to the health and safety of Massachusetts residents.

The Equal Justice Coalition

Louis Tompros, Chair • Laura Booth, Director

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In addition to providing direct legal services to individuals, civil legal aid attorneys strengthen the court system and the Commonwealth's commitment to equal access to justice in a variety of ways. First, legal aid ensures that the merits of a case alone determine the outcome. When an individual does not have legal representation, administrative errors, language and literacy barriers, the complexity of the court system, and a host of other issues can influence or alter the result. When all parties in a dispute have legal representation, the courts operate more effectively for all litigants, which maintains faith in the fair administration of justice. Legal aid levels the playing field.

Second, civil legal aid attorneys in Massachusetts possess immeasurable expertise in poverty law. Hundreds of private attorneys who are members of bar associations that make up the Equal Justice Coalition conduct pro bono work coordinated by civil legal aid organizations. In addition to providing direct service to low-income clients, legal aid attorneys train and support their pro bono counterparts, maximizing the number of people that receive help, and the quality of legal advice they receive. Furthermore, legal aid attorneys conduct educational workshops and "know your rights" training sessions for members of the public—especially members of vulnerable communities—to help people understand the law and empower them to advocate for themselves.

Third, civil legal aid attorneys are critical in efforts to address emerging challenges facing the Commonwealth. Fighting the opioid epidemic, recovering from the Merrimack Valley gas explosions, protecting students' rights, understanding and navigating the potential effects of the President's proposed "public charge" rule, reacting to natural disasters, and mitigating the impact of rising housing costs on low-income families all require legal help—and for many residents of our state, free legal assistance through the local, MLAC-funded legal aid organization in their community is their last resort.

Once again, we are very grateful for your support of legal aid. Please include \$26 million for civil legal aid through the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (line item 0321-1600) in your FY20 budget recommendations. We hope that we can continue to work in partnership with you to increase access to justice for all residents. Thank you for your leadership.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Tompros". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Louis Tompros  
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition

CC:

Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito

Chief Justice Ralph Gants

Secretary Michael J. Heffernan

Secretary Jay Ash

Secretary Marylou Sudders

Kristen Lepore, Chief of Staff

Lon Povich, Chief Legal Counsel

Elizabeth Mahoney, Policy Director

Kaitlyn Sprague, Legislative Affairs Director

Robert Ross, General Counsel Executive Office for Administration and Finance