

January 15, 2019

The Honorable Charles D. Baker  
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Massachusetts State House, Room 280  
24 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Re: Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), line item 0321-1600  
FY20 Budget Request: \$26 million

Dear Governor Baker,

As deans of the Massachusetts law schools, we write to thank you for your continued support of civil legal aid in the Commonwealth. Your approval of \$21.04 million in funding for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) in the FY19 budget, demonstrates your commitment to increasing access to justice for all residents of Massachusetts. In light of the vital role that civil legal aid plays in advocating for low-income and vulnerable residents of the Commonwealth, we urge you to recommend \$26 million in appropriation for MLAC through line item 0321-1600 in your FY20 budget recommendations.

The institutions that we lead are committed to the principle of equal justice under the law. As educators, we seek to instill this principle in our students, many of whom, through legal clinics, coursework, and internships see firsthand the difference that access to free and high-quality legal services—like those offered by civil legal aid programs—can make in people’s lives. Our students have seen that without access to civil legal aid, older adults and people with disabilities may not be able to access lifesaving medication, families may lose their homes unjustly, parents may be unable to access benefits for their children, and survivors of domestic violence may be unable to get the protection they need. Additionally, we are keenly aware that the impact of civil legal aid extends far beyond improving the lives of individual clients. Access to civil legal aid impacts and is impacted by systemic issues that touch all corners of the Commonwealth, such as the opioid crisis, healthcare, housing shortages, climate change, and immigration policy, among many others. Adequately funding civil legal aid is an essential part of ensuring that the Commonwealth’s responses to these systemic issues supports all residents, regardless of their income.

There are over 800,000 low-income residents living in Massachusetts who are eligible for civil legal aid (eligible residents have incomes at or below 125% of the poverty level, or \$31,375 annually for a family of four). Due to a lack of resources, MLAC-funded programs are forced to turn away 65% of eligible cases—nearly 45,000 people each year. Our students, many of whom chose to study law to advocate for vulnerable populations, are eager to serve in legal aid settings. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, many legal aid programs cannot afford to hire new attorneys, further limiting their ability to serve more Massachusetts residents.

When eligible cases are turned down, potential clients are faced with the decision to either represent themselves throughout the complicated legal process — which can further disrupt their lives and impede court proceedings— or entirely forgo any attempt to achieve justice in the court system. As leaders of institutions tasked with training future generations of lawyers, we believe no one should have to choose between being able to work, raise their families, and participate fully in their communities, and justice. Additionally, we understand that investing in civil legal aid is a wise economic decision. In FY18, MLAC funded programs brought in an estimated \$60.5 million in economic benefits to Massachusetts and its residents. These benefits include over \$20 million saved when—with

the help of civil legal aid—clients were able to avoid homelessness, emergency room visits, and losing their federal benefits, all of which can be costly for the Commonwealth. For these reasons, we urge you to include MLAC’s request of \$26 million in your FY20 budget recommendations.

We thank you for your dedication to serving the Commonwealth and its residents.

Sincerely,



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cc: Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito  
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