

REMARKS: MBA PRESIDENT CHRISTOPHER A. KENNEY
WALK TO THE HILL
JAN. 24, 2019

Thank you. I am Christopher Kenney, president of the Massachusetts Bar Association. I want to express my gratitude to Equal Justice Coalition Chair Louis Tompros, Supreme Judicial Court Chief Justice Ralph Gants, Boston Bar Association President Jonathan Albano, and all of you for joining us today for this important event.

The MBA is proud of our advocacy on behalf of civil legal aid, particularly the work we've done in partnership with MLAC and the Equal Justice Coalition, along with the Boston Bar Association.

Before I go any further, I want to take a moment to welcome Lynne Parker, the new executive director of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation. You have an ally in the Massachusetts Bar Association, and we look forward to working with you and all our friends in the organized legal community to

ensure that access to justice is a reality for all people in Massachusetts.

It is an honor to stand with you as we again make an impassioned plea to our elected officials to increase funding for civil legal aid in the commonwealth.

This is our 20th year at Walk to the Hill. While the numbers and budget requests have changed over the years, the need for additional funding for legal aid remains. Meanwhile, new issues, including the opioid addiction epidemic, have put an even greater burden on our communities and courts. That's why, even with periodic increases, we're still struggling to ensure our ultimate goal, which is true justice for all.

You'll hear a lot of facts and figures today, including MLAC's \$26 million budget request that we hope to see included in next fiscal year's signed budget. But there is one other figure that I want to focus on, and it's the reason I call this a crisis ... and that figure is "two-thirds."

Two-thirds is the fraction of people *turned away* by legal aid programs each year in Massachusetts because of a lack of funding. And, keep in mind, that these are *eligible* people who meet or are below the income levels needed to qualify for legal aid.

Put another way, more than 66 percent of eligible people in Massachusetts are forced to face life-changing legal matters alone, making it less likely they'll succeed and more likely that they'll require other state resources and add to the state's fiscal burden.

To illustrate what this means, I want you to look around this room. There are hundreds of us here today united in one goal to increase funding for legal aid. It's inspiring, and I'm grateful for all the firms and lawyers who signed up with teams to visit legislators today.

But now I want you to think of this room as a microcosm of our commonwealth's eligible residents. *(Look to the left)* Everyone over to the left third of the room ... you can have a lawyer. *(Look center and right)* The rest of you ... I'm sorry, you're on your own. We won't have a lawyer for you this year. And it doesn't matter if

you're a veteran who sacrificed for our country, or that you're about to lose your house, or that you're trying to escape an abusive relationship, or fighting a battle against a life-changing illness.

If there is a silver lining to this crisis, it's that lawyers, as a profession, have routinely stood up for and worked to lessen the impact of the funding gap through their own pro bono efforts.

This spring, the MBA will launch its first-ever Trial Academy to help prepare young litigators to be better trial lawyers. A vital component to this program will be a requirement that Academy participants volunteer their services at courthouses to provide pro bono limited assistance representation to unrepresented litigants. It's intended to be another way for lawyers to give their time and expertise to help those in need.

Every pro bono effort is time well spent. Whether you're volunteering at a bar association, or you work at a firm with a robust pro bono program, or you volunteer your own time to be the lawyer for the day, you are doing an incredible service.

But lawyers' volunteer efforts alone cannot tackle this crisis. We need more funding for civil legal aid programs so that legal aid attorneys don't have to turn away two-thirds of the people that come to them.

Just adding \$5 million more to MLAC's budget would change things so that instead of *MOST* people getting turned away at legal aid's door, we can get closer to a commonwealth where *ALL* people would get access to lawyers during the times they need them the most.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, and I want to thank you on behalf of the MBA for taking time out of your busy practices to come to this Walk to the Hill. We have an important job ahead of us today and beyond as we continue to bring attention to this critical issue.

As you talk with your legislators, tell them that funding for legal aid is a public issue that impacts their communities and their constituents. We can no longer afford to abandon two-thirds of eligible residents who need legal help. Just \$5 million more will move us closer toward our goal of equal justice for all. Thank you.