

LT WALK TO THE HILL WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome to the 20th Annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid!

My name is Louis Tompros, and I am the Chair of the Equal Justice Coalition.

On the 20th anniversary of our Walk, I'd like to start with a little history. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the cradle of liberty, and the birthplace of the idea and the ideal of the democratic rule of law. It was here more than 250 years ago where our predecessors first rejected oppression and tyranny, in favor of liberty and justice for all. The rule of law began here.

And the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was also the birthplace of the idea and the ideal of access to justice for all. In 1919, Reginald Heber Smith—then the director of the Boston Legal Aid Society—famously wrote these words in his article *Justice and the Poor*:

“Without equal access to the law, the system not only robs the poor of their only protection, but places in the hands of their oppressors the most powerful and ruthless weapon ever invented.”

It was here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that we developed the rule of law, it was here that we recognized its incredible power, and it was here that we recognized that equal access to the legal system—regardless of ability to pay—is a necessary condition to a free and just society.

Now fast forward to the 1980s—when we found ourselves facing the elimination of federal funding for civil legal aid. Then again, we led the way here in Massachusetts. It was here and then that the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation was born, and with it, the promise to everyone in the Commonwealth that—with or without help from the federal government or anyone else—legal services would be available for those who needed them most.

Today, we are living in difficult times, and access to justice is more important than ever. So many of our friends and neighbors are falling victim to the opioid crisis, domestic violence, homelessness, and elder abuse. Our returning veterans struggle to find the care and services they need, and those fleeing violence and persecution find little refuge at our borders. Our federal government [was/remains] in the longest shutdown in history—leaving federal workers unpaid and in need of help, while at the same time stopping many of the very services at the federal level that aid those most in need.

Who is going to help? Who is going to ensure access to justice for those who need it most?

It is up to us. It is up to us here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to ensure our neighbors are not robbed of their right to access the legal system to address their needs, and to redress the wrongs against them. It is up to us as lawyers in the Commonwealth to make sure that the Legislature hears and understands that the legal system matters,

that access to justice matters, and that lawyers matter. And it is up to us in this room to fight as hard as we can to ensure that everyone facing eviction, abuse, or deportation has a lawyer to stand up for their rights.

It is up to us to follow in the path of our predecessors in the 1770s, the 1910s, and the 1980s. And it is up to us to lead—to say that it is unacceptable when anyone with a life-altering legal problem is denied access to justice and access to a lawyer—just because they can't afford to pay. If we are serious about “liberty and justice for all,” it is up to us to make it a reality.

Now, I mentioned that MLAC was founded in the 1980s, and, as many of you know, it was led from its founding until last year by one of the greatest lawyers our Commonwealth and our nation has ever known—the extraordinary Lonnie Powers. We wouldn't have the rule of law without John Adams, we wouldn't have legal aid without Reginald Heber Smith, and we wouldn't have MLAC without Lonnie Powers. Lonnie, we are all honored to travel the trail you blazed.

And I'm honored to introduce you to the person who is leading us on that trail today. Lynne Parker has more than three decades of experience advocating on behalf of those who need it most. Most recently, she was executive director of New Hampshire Legal Assistance, where she served originally as a staff attorney, then deputy director, then executive director. Her Massachusetts and MLAC roots run deep—she is a Massachusetts native, she interned in law school at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (an MLAC-funded organization), and worked as a lawyer at the Southeastern Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation—now South Coastal Counties Legal Services (another MLAC-funded organization). During her time as a legal aid attorney, she has been a dedicated and passionate housing advocate. And throughout her career, she has promoted staff diversity and linguistic competence, advocated for the rights of people with limited English proficiency, and conducted outreach to underserved communities—particularly Spanish-speaking residents.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming—to address the Walk to the Hill for the first time—the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, Lynne Parker.