

January 16, 2020

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,
FY21 request for \$29m in line item 0321-1600**

Dear Governor Baker:

As the deans of law schools from across Massachusetts, we thank you for approving \$24 million in funding for civil legal aid through the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC, line-item 0321-1600) in the FY20 budget. As both attorneys and educators, we understand that the protections offered to low-income residents by legal aid organizations are vital to ensuring that the Commonwealth is not only an equitable place to live but also an equitable place to work and learn. For this reason, we fully support the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation's request for \$29 million in your FY21 budget recommendations.

Throughout their legal education, we aim to instill in our students a commitment to the principle of equal justice under the law. Through internships with legal aid organizations across Massachusetts, our students gain firsthand experience in fighting for this principle while supporting legal aid advocates working with clients like Mario, a 6-year-old boy with autism, and his mother. When Mario's mother first contacted Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC), a statewide legal aid organization funded by MLAC, Mario had missed over 50 days of school after being unexpectedly placed in a kindergarten classroom that did not meet the requirements outlined in his Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Without the support he needed which was previously promised by the school, Mario's education quickly suffered. With the help of a legal aid attorney from the Autism Center at MAC, Mario was successfully placed in an inclusive classroom with all of the support he needs to thrive at school.

Mario and his mother are just two of the 88,000 people, representing residents from 94 percent of the cities and towns in Massachusetts, helped by legal aid last year. Unfortunately, due to funding constraints legal aid organizations must still make difficult decisions about whose cases they can take. Last year, over 50 percent of eligible residents—defined as those living at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level (or \$32,188 annually for a family of four)—were turned away. We recognize that increased funding is needed to expand the impact of MLAC-funded legal aid organizations.

As the leaders of institutions tasked with training the next generation of attorneys, we are proud to see in many of our students a passion for public service. Unfortunately, we are also acutely aware of the burden that student loan debt places on both graduating students and their prospective employers. We understand that younger attorneys with significant debt must balance their career goals and financial realities, making it difficult for legal aid organizations to recruit new graduates when other employers can offer higher salaries and more robust benefits packages. Support for increased funding will help legal aid organizations as they build a dynamic and talented workforce that includes both recent graduates and experienced attorneys. Such a workforce is essential to ensuring that legal aid organizations can respond to emerging challenges, such as the affordable housing crisis and the increasing number of older adults

living in poverty, while remaining dedicated to the day-to-day work they have been doing in their communities for decades.

From fighting unjust evictions to helping parents advocate for the educational rights of their children, to responding to the systemic challenges that touch all corners of the Commonwealth, legal aid is an essential part of a fair and efficient justice system in Massachusetts. For this reason, we once again urge you to include MLAC's request for \$29 million in your FY21 budget recommendations.

We thank you for your leadership, and for continuing to make funding for civil legal aid a priority.

Sincerely,



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Massachusetts School of Law



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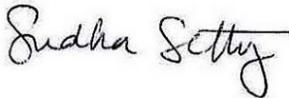
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cc:

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