

Walk to the Hill  
2019 Sponsors



December 10, 2019

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**

**FY21 Budget Request: \$29 million**

Dear Governor Baker:

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC) and our partners across the Commonwealth, thank you for approving a \$24 million appropriation for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) in the FY20 budget. A partnership between MLAC and the private bar, including the Massachusetts Bar Association and the Boston Bar Association, the Equal Justice Coalition is deeply grateful for your support. Your commitment to justice supports legal aid organizations as they continue to serve low-income people and communities across the Commonwealth.

**The Equal Justice Coalition fully supports the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation's request for \$29 million in FY21. To ensure that the Commonwealth continues to take steps towards fulfilling the promise of equal justice for all, we urge you to include this amount, a \$5 million increase over FY20, in your FY21 budget recommendations.**

Last year, legal aid organizations helped over 88,000 people in 94 percent of the cities and towns across Massachusetts. From combating wage-theft, to assisting families seeking protection from violence in their home countries, to ensuring that older adults and veterans receive the benefits they need, legal aid provides vital assistance to vulnerable residents who face civil legal issues that threaten their health and well-being. Unfortunately, due to limited funding, legal aid organizations must still make difficult decisions, about who they can help. In FY19, more than 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.

As the Commonwealth faces shifting challenges, so do legal aid organizations and their clients. Across the state, the growing population of older adults living in poverty has resulted in an increase in elderly clients with complex and often intersecting civil legal needs related to housing, health care, and benefits. In particular, cases involving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) have become more drawn out, often taking years to resolve. In addition, as housing costs continue to rise, it has become increasingly difficult for low-income people of all ages, including those with vouchers and subsidies, to find safe and stable housing.

The Equal Justice Coalition

Louis Tompros, Chair • Laura Booth, Director

18 Tremont Street, Suite 1010 • Boston, MA 02108 • [www.equaljusticecoalition.org](http://www.equaljusticecoalition.org)

- Boston Bar Association
- Massachusetts Bar Association
- Albanian American Bar Association
- Asian American Lawyers Association of Massachusetts
- Attleboro Area Bar Association
- Bar Association of Norfolk County
- Barnstable County Bar Association
- Berkshire County Bar Association
- Bristol County Bar Association
- Essex County Bar Association
- Federal Bar Association
- Franklin County Bar Association
- Hampden County Bar Association
- Hampshire County Bar Association
- Massachusetts Juvenile Bar Association
- Mass. LGBTQ Bar Association
- Massachusetts Academy of Trial Attorneys
- Massachusetts Association of Elder Law Attorneys
- Massachusetts Association of Hispanic Attorneys
- Massachusetts Black Lawyers Association
- Massachusetts Black Women Attorneys
- Massachusetts Defense Lawyers Association
- Massachusetts Employment Lawyers Association
- Massachusetts Juvenile Bar Association
- Middlesex County Bar Association
- National Lawyers Guild
- New England Muslim Bar Association
- The Real Estate Bar Association For Massachusetts
- South Asian Bar Association of Greater Boston
- Women's Bar Association

With limited funding, legal aid organizations often must direct resources from ongoing work in order to address emerging challenges. An increase in funding in FY21 would help ensure that legal aid organizations can continue to respond to new challenges, such as the affordable housing crises, as they arise while remaining committed to the day-to-day work they have been in their communities for decades.

In addition to being an essential part of the Commonwealth's response to emerging challenges, funding legal aid is a wise investment of state resources. When funding for civil legal aid increases, the economic benefits to Massachusetts and its residents increase as well. **In FY19, with an appropriation of \$21 million, the work of MLAC-funded legal aid organizations generated an economic benefit of \$69 million.** This includes cost savings related to emergency services such as health care and shelter, recovered federal benefits, benefits paid directly to residents such as SNAP benefits, as well as money restored to residents who can then spend it in their communities.

For low-income residents of the Commonwealth, access to civil legal aid either through direct representation or "Know Your Rights" workshops that empower clients to advocate for themselves can be life-changing. To ensure that legal aid organizations can continue to advocate for and with some of our state's most vulnerable residents, we strongly urge you to include \$29 million in funding for MLAC in your FY21 budget recommendations.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to expanding justice in Massachusetts. We look forward to continuing to work with you on this important cause.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Tompros", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Louis Tompros  
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition

cc:

Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito  
The Honorable Ralph D. Gants  
Secretary Michael J. Heffernan  
Secretary Marylou Sudders  
Secretary Mike Kennealy  
Kristen Lepore, Chief of Staff  
Robert Ross, Chief Legal Counsel  
Elizabeth Mahoney, Policy Director  
Kaitlyn Sprague, Legislative Affairs Director  
John Stephen, General Counsel Executive Office for Administration and Finance

