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February 28, 2020

Representative Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
Massachusetts State House, Room 243
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

**Re: Civil Legal Aid Funding, Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, line item 0321-1600
FY21 Budget Request: \$29 million**

Dear Chair Michlewitz:

On behalf of the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC) and our partners across the Commonwealth, thank you for your continued leadership in support of civil legal aid. The \$24 million allocated to the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC, line item 0321-1600) in the FY20 budget helps ensure that MLAC-funded legal aid organizations can continue to provide high-quality legal assistance. However, legal aid organizations need additional funding to respond to new challenges facing low-income residents across Massachusetts. For these reasons, the Equal Justice Coalition fully supports the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation's budget request for \$29 million in FY21. **I write today to ask that you please keep civil legal aid a priority and include this request in the FY21 House Ways and Means budget.**

Legal assistance is essential to helping people like Kenda and her four children. Kenda bravely shared her story with hundreds of members of the private bar who gathered at the State House last month for the Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid.

Kenda was left with no way to provide for her young family when her abusive husband walked out on Christmas Eve. Recognizing her need for legal assistance, staff at the South Shore Women's Resource Center provided Kenda with a referral to South Coastal Counties Legal Services (SCCLS) in addition to the food and diapers she was looking for.

Legal aid lawyers at SCCLS helped her attain a restraining order and represented her in a years-long divorce dispute. The case went to trial in family court, where a judge awarded Kenda sole legal custody of her children and half the proceeds from their only asset – the family house. Unfortunately, her legal battles continued when her former parents-in-law sued her for that money, claiming they had loaned it to her. They also claimed she wasn't eligible for representation by legal aid lawyers. The judge disagreed, allowing the SCCLS lawyers to represent her again, this time before a jury in district court. The jury ruled in Kenda's favor. Kenda used the settlement to put a down payment on a home she was able to purchase through an affordable housing lottery. Two years after her legal battle ended, Kenda has started a new job and she and her are children thriving.

Though equal justice under the law is the cornerstone of our judicial system, the prohibitive cost of legal representation makes it difficult to obtain for low-income residents. Legal aid organizations are often the only place the most vulnerable people can turn to when they need civil legal assistance. Last year, MLAC-funded legal aid organizations helped more than 88,000 people in 94 percent of the cities and towns across Massachusetts, including 20,545 residents in your district. From combating wage-theft to ensuring that older adults receive the benefits they need, legal aid provides vital assistance to residents who face civil legal issues that threaten their health and well-being.

The Equal Justice Coalition

Louis Tompros, Chair • Laura Booth, Director

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Increased funding not only helps improve access to justice, it is also a wise investment of state resources. In FY19, the work of legal aid organizations provided an economic benefit of more than \$69 million to Massachusetts and its residents. That includes \$53 million in direct benefits to legal aid clients as well as \$16 million in federal reimbursements and savings for the Commonwealth.

Unfortunately, last year, lack of resources forced legal aid organizations to turn away more than half of eligible residents who sought assistance—those with an income at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty level or \$32,750 for a family of four. In the meantime, challenges are mounting for the Commonwealth's most economically disadvantaged. Across Massachusetts, the growing population of impoverished older adults has resulted in an increase in elderly clients with complex civil legal needs related to housing, health care, and benefits. Additionally, cases involving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) are growing more complicated, often taking years to resolve. And as housing costs continue to skyrocket, low-income people of all ages—including those with vouchers and subsidies—are struggling to find safe and stable housing. With limited funding, legal aid organizations must often direct resources from ongoing work in other areas to address these emerging challenges.

An increase in FY21 funding would also help legal aid organizations recruit and retain the talented attorneys and staff that are the backbone of legal aid work. Building a skilled and dynamic workforce is essential to legal aid's ability to take on new and more complex cases while remaining dedicated to the work they have been doing in their communities for decades.

On behalf of the EJC and our partners, I urge you to please support a \$5 million increase—for a total of \$29 million—for the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation in the FY21 House Ways and Means budget. Thank you for all that you do for the Commonwealth

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Tompros". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Louis Tompros
Chair, Equal Justice Coalition