

Funding the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation: \$49 Million for Civil Legal Aid in FY24



Line Item 0321-1600

FY23 Appropriation: \$41 million | FY24 Governor's Recommendation: \$49 million | FY24 House of Representatives Recommendation: \$49 million | FY24 Senate Recommendation: \$49 million

CIVIL LEGAL AID IS A LIFELINE FOR MASSACHUSETTS RESIDENTS IN CRISIS.

Civil legal aid organizations provide an essential service to Massachusetts residents seeking solutions to problems that impact their basic needs, including housing, employment, domestic safety, immigration, and more. Recent funding increases at the state level have helped legal aid advocates serve more people when and where they need assistance. Notably, increased investments over the past few years have resulted in a 10% decrease in the number of eligible residents being turned away, reducing this number from 57% to 47%. While this achievement is admirable, significant need for civil legal services remains.

People and families with incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level (\$37,500 per year for a family of four; \$18,255 for an individual) qualify for civil legal aid.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic remain acute for our state's most vulnerable residents. Legal aid cases have grown significantly in a number of issue areas since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Compared to the three years before the pandemic (FY17–FY19), case averages from FY20–FY22 reveal:

320% increase in **Unemployment Insurance** cases, to an average of 2,565 cases per year

23% increase in **Private Landlord/Tenant** cases, to an average of 3,978 cases per year

40% increase in **Domestic Violence** cases, to an average of 410 cases per year

29% increase in **Immigration/Naturalization** cases, to an average of 2,562 cases per year

26% increase in **Federally Subsidized Housing** cases, to an average of 2,644 cases per year

LEGAL AID IN FY22:

96,649 people benefited from civil legal aid in Massachusetts

\$126 million in estimated economic benefits delivered to the Commonwealth and its residents

Residents in **94%** of cities and towns in Massachusetts were assisted by civil legal aid





MLAC AT A GLANCE

MLAC is the largest funder of civil legal aid in the Commonwealth. It distributes state-appropriated funding to 16 legal aid organizations across Massachusetts and provides supports in the areas of information technology; data and research; hiring and recruitment; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and communications. MLAC also partners with legal aid organizations, bar associations, and the Access to Justice Commission to activate a network of *pro bono* lawyers and publish legal self-help materials.

Delivering on the promise of equal justice for all. Civil legal aid organizations provide advice and representation at no cost to people with low incomes who need help with serious legal issues. Without legal aid, people must navigate a complex court system alone—with potentially dire consequences to their health and well-being. Everyone deserves a fair process during civil proceedings, regardless of their income. Legal aid helps Massachusetts uphold the promise of equal justice for all outlined in the Commonwealth's Constitution.

Jenny* was scammed out of \$3,000 through bank check fraud. The bank held her liable for the full amount, closed her bank account, and informed a consumer credit reporting agency—effectively barring her from traditional banking. Language access issues also made it hard for her to challenge the bank's actions on her own; Jenny is an immigrant, and English is her second language. After a **Greater Boston Legal Services** attorney advocated on her behalf, the bank returned Jenny's \$3,000 and requested the credit reporting agency change its records.

Imagine not knowing your landlord was trying to evict you until you were being forced to move out on the spot. That's what happened to **Bill***, who is blind. Bill had asked his landlord to tell him about any issues verbally or through text/email notices that his phone could read out loud. Despite this request, Bill's landlord mailed him an eviction notice, which Bill couldn't read. A **Community Legal Aid** attorney represented Bill and compelled the landlord to not only drop the eviction, but also waive six months of future rent and cover the costs of moving back in.

*Names changed for client privacy.

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