

February 19, 2009

The Honorable Therese Murray
Senate President
State House, Room 332
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Madam President:

As counsel to some of the state's leading corporations and institutions, we write again this year to urge your support for an issue that is critical to the Commonwealth and our system of justice. Due to the dramatic decline in Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) revenue, which constitutes a substantial portion of funding for civil legal aid, the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) expects to see its total funding decline by almost 40% this year. As a result, legal aid programs will receive \$8.5 million less from MLAC than last year. It is therefore critical that the state appropriation for legal aid be maintained at its current level in FY10 despite the difficult economic circumstances facing the Commonwealth.

As you know, the shortage of legal aid is already a serious problem throughout the state with local programs forced to turn away nearly half of all eligible callers. As a result, low-income Massachusetts residents with civil legal problems often find themselves without legal advice and representation. They are left to navigate the judicial system by themselves when confronted with complex issues such as domestic violence, child custody, homelessness, disability and other critical human needs.

Businesses and institutions rely on the smooth functioning of our legal system, and access to justice is fundamental to the operation of that system. Civil legal aid is a cost effective program that helps maintain the equities that hold together our democratic society and our Commonwealth. It is clear to us, as corporate and institutional attorneys, that unless everyone has access to the courts, the perception of bias can erode confidence in our justice system and our government.

It is essential that the Commonwealth provide a level playing field, so that legal advice and representation in serious civil matters is available to those who need it notwithstanding their ability to pay. We urge you to protect legal aid from additional cuts this year by maintaining funding for MLAC in your fiscal year 2010 budget (line item 0321-1600).

Thank you for considering our request. We deeply appreciate your support.

Very truly yours,