



# Equal Justice Coalition

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January 22, 2010

The Honorable Robert A. DeLeo  
Speaker of the House of Representatives  
State House, Room 356  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Speaker DeLeo:

As managing partners of some of the Boston area's leading law firms, we join the Equal Justice Coalition's effort to raise awareness regarding the unprecedented crisis threatening civil legal aid to the poor. As you know, the recent dramatic decline in Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) revenue has forced the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) to cut its grants to the legal aid programs it funds by 54% over the last two years. As the recession drags on, these programs are experiencing a dramatic increase in demand for services, while coping with severely reduced budgets. It is therefore critical that the state appropriation for legal aid be maintained at its current level of \$9.5 million in FY11 despite the difficult economic circumstances facing the Commonwealth.

Law firms as well as individual attorneys contribute significant time and money on behalf of civil legal aid. In fiscal year 2009, law firm and individual donations to MLAC-funded programs amounted to \$4.6 million. In addition, MLAC-funded programs recruited and trained 554 private attorneys, who collectively donated 23,115 hours of legal advice and representation. The value of their time was \$5.2 million. Without legal aid attorneys, who provide the subject matter expertise and connection to clients, private attorneys could not effectively participate in *pro bono* work. The state's support of legal aid is the foundation that leverages this important *pro bono* contribution.

Without legal assistance, low-income litigants do not have meaningful access to the courts. As attorneys, we see these situations unfolding every day with the predictable outcome of lives being unnecessarily disrupted and sometimes ruined. Lack of access to the courts erodes confidence in the fairness of our Commonwealth. At the same time, *pro se* litigants slow the system for all users, creating inefficiencies and added expenses for everyone.

It is essential that the Commonwealth make legal advice and representation in serious civil matters 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 2011 budget (line item 0321-1600) at \$9,500,000.

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

Very truly yours,

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