

February 25, 2010

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

Dear Mr. Speaker:

As counsel to the state's leading corporations and institutions, we write again this year to urge your support for civil legal aid funding – an issue which is of the utmost importance to the Commonwealth and our system of justice. Due to the recent unprecedented decline in revenue derived from the Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program (which constitutes a substantial portion of funding for civil legal aid), the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) was forced 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 crucial that the state appropriation for legal aid be maintained at its current level of \$9.5 million in FY11 despite the continuing, difficult economic circumstances facing the Commonwealth.

The shortage of legal aid has been a perennial problem. Even before the economic downturn, local programs were forced to turn away half of eligible applicants for assistance. Today, as a result of the continuing recession, even more low-income Massachusetts residents with civil legal problems can expect to find themselves without legal advice and representation. When confronted with complex issues such as domestic violence, child custody, homelessness, disability and other critical legal problems, they will be left to navigate the judicial system by themselves.

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 recommending level funding for MLAC in your fiscal year 2011 budget (line item 0321-1600).

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

Very truly yours,