

Media Contact:

Brianne Miers
617-391-5621
bmiers@mlac.org

Nearly 700 Attorneys Converge on State House to Support Funding for Civil Legal Aid
Governor Patrick Makes Surprise Appearance, Pleases Crowd with Funding Announcement

BOSTON (January 27, 2010) – Governor Patrick told a crowd of nearly 700 attorneys at the State House this morning that despite a difficult budget year, he was requesting level funding for civil legal aid in the FY11 budget.

“Everybody in this room shares as I do a commitment to doing everything we can for people for whom access to justice isn't real,” said Patrick in his address.

This was the 11th annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid, which mobilizes private bar support for civil legal aid programs. The event was co-sponsored by the Equal Justice Coalition, Boston Bar Association, Massachusetts Bar Association, and 29 local and specialty bar associations.

Civil legal aid programs provide legal advice and representation to low-income Massachusetts residents with critical, non-criminal legal problems. As one of the largest advocacy efforts in the state, Walk to the Hill has been responsible for increasing the prominence of civil legal aid as a funding priority for legislators.

“We are thrilled by the Governor’s continued support of civil legal aid,” said Lonnie Powers, executive director of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), “and the support from the private bar has been tremendous, as indicated by today’s turnout.”

MLAC is the largest source of funding for civil legal aid in the Commonwealth, receiving both an appropriation in the state budget (line item 0321-1600, funded at \$9.5 million in FY10) and income from the Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program. Due to a drastic decrease in IOLTA revenue, MLAC already has been forced to cut grants to the 17 programs it funds by 54 percent this fiscal year.

The speaking program featured Boston Bar Association President John J. Regan and Massachusetts Bar Association President-elect Denise Squillante. “At the core of our ability to meet the needs for legal assistance is funding at the state level,” said Squillante. Such funding will help ensure appropriate legal counsel regardless of the economic barriers Massachusetts citizens may face.”

Former legal aid client Carmelita T. of Mattapan shared her story with attendees. A single parent, Carmelita had to leave her full-time job to care for her daughter, who was diagnosed with emotional and psychological disorders. “The whole situation was breaking my heart,” said Carmelita.

Carmelita was denied unemployment benefits on the basis that she was looking for part-time, rather than full-time, employment. Her legal aid attorney won a precedent-setting decision, affirming that caretakers of children with disabilities may search for part-time work without affecting their eligibility for unemployment benefits. “[My legal aid attorney] listened to me and understood. I can’t tell you what a relief it was to know that I wouldn’t have to go to the appeal alone.” She added, “I’m proud that my case set a precedent for other working parents.”

Following the speaking program, the attorneys visited their legislators and asked them to protect funding for civil legal aid in the FY11 budget.

“Steep cuts in funding have had a devastating impact on legal services and on low income individuals in desperate need of legal representation,” said Regan. “Each day, those eligible for legal aid programs are turned away due to a lack of resources, despite the efforts of hard-working legal services lawyers to serve them. Our courts are full of low-income people with critical legal needs who attempt to navigate the system by themselves, further burdening our judges and court clerks.”

Private attorneys have no direct stake in civil legal aid funding. However, they see firsthand the effects of the civil legal aid shortage. Even in strong economic times, legal aid programs turn away about half of Massachusetts residents eligible for help. Those turned away often appear in court unrepresented, leaving them at a severe disadvantage.

“The need for legal services is greater than ever,” said Julia Huston, chair of the Equal Justice Coalition. “Families in Massachusetts are struggling to maintain their housing, jobs and health care, and often civil legal aid is their only hope. Today we are here as attorneys and as citizens asking for level funding to help make access to justice a reality for all during these difficult economic times.”

About the Equal Justice Coalition

The Equal Justice Coalition, a collaboration of the Boston Bar Association, Massachusetts Bar Association and the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), works to support the state appropriation for civil legal aid. For more information, visit <http://www.equaljusticecoalition.org>.

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