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Record Turnout at 10th Annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid

Nearly 800 Attorneys Gather at State House to Urge Legislators to Protect Legal Aid Funding

BOSTON (January 22, 2009) – Hundreds of attorneys from some of the most prestigious law firms in Boston and Massachusetts gathered at the State House today to urge legislators to maintain funding for civil legal aid programs, which provide advice and assistance to the Commonwealth's low-income residents who have critical, non-criminal legal problems threatening their homes, health and incomes.

Participants heard the emotional story of legal aid client Lisa Damon whose family was able to remain in their Uxbridge home following foreclosure with the help of a legal aid attorney. Soon after her husband, Spc. Michael Damon, returned from 15 months of service in Iraq – unable to work due to the injuries he sustained there – their mortgage rate jumped to nearly 11 percent, and they could no longer afford their payments. The attorney was able to get the mortgage company to drop the eviction, and the Damons' were recently approved for a new mortgage to buy back their home.

"We're still in our home, we're back on our feet, and we've got the legal support we need to make this work," says Lisa Damon.

This was the 10th annual Walk to the Hill for Civil Legal Aid, which began in 2000 with only 75 attorneys in attendance. Last year, 600 attorneys participated in the event, which over the years has been responsible for increasing the prominence of legal aid as a funding priority for legislators.

Private attorneys have no direct stake in civil legal aid funding. However, they see firsthand the effects of the civil legal aid shortage every day. 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 shortage of legal aid funding has reached crisis proportions," says Julia Huston, chair of the Equal Justice Coalition. "This year, we are asking the legislature to simply maintain funding for civil legal aid at its current level in the coming state budget."

Following the speaking program, which also featured Boston Bar Association President Kathy B. Weinman and Massachusetts Bar Association President Edward W. McIntyre, the attorneys met with their legislators and urged them to protect funding for civil legal aid.

According to McIntyre, "Level funding for civil legal services is at the core of our ability to meet the increasing need for legal assistance in today's economic climate. Such funding will ensure access to appropriate legal counsel regardless of the economic barriers citizens may face."

The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) is the largest source of funding for civil legal aid in the Commonwealth. MLAC receives both an appropriation in the state budget (line item 0321-1600, funded at \$11 million in FY09) and income from the Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program. MLAC already has been forced to cut general support grants to the 17 programs it funds by 40 percent this fiscal year due to a drastic decrease in IOLTA revenue.

"As a result of the dramatic drop in interest rates and the decline in the number of real estate and other transactions, revenue generated by IOLTA for legal aid is projected to plunge by 54% this fiscal year alone," says Weinman. "These reductions come at a time when the need for legal aid has never been greater. People are struggling to survive and put food on their tables and shelter over their families' heads. At moments like these, the requests for legal assistance in areas such as unemployment benefits, evictions, bankruptcy and even domestic violence multiply."

About the Equal Justice Coalition

Founded in 1998 by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, the Massachusetts Bar Association and the Boston Bar Association, the Equal Justice Coalition advocates in support of civil legal aid programs. The EJC has more than 170 member organizations, including private bar and community-based organizations, business, government, healthcare, labor, religion, and many others. For more information, visit <http://equaljusticecoalition.org>.

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