



[www.legalaiddc.org](http://www.legalaiddc.org)  
1331 H Street, NW  
Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 628-1161

**Testimony of Vikram Swaarup  
Executive Director  
Legal Aid DC**

**Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants**

**May 6, 2026**

Legal Aid DC<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony regarding the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) and specifically, the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ). The Council's continued investment in OVSJG allows Legal Aid to provide free legal services to some of our most vulnerable District neighbors. As such, we urge the Council to fully restore ATJ funding at approximately \$32 million in FY2027.

**ATJ Funding Supports the District's Safety Net and Meets the Moment**

The mayor has proposed an extreme cut of 86% for Access to Justice funding for FY2027 – down to \$4.5 million from almost \$32 million.<sup>2</sup> The Access to Justice Commission estimates that, if this cut is approved, almost 40,000 District residents would go without access to legal services.<sup>3</sup> This cut represents a direct threat to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit [www.LegalAidDC.org](http://www.LegalAidDC.org).

<sup>2</sup> 2027 F00 Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, <https://cfo.dc.gov/node/1823001>.

<sup>3</sup> Access to Justice Commission, <https://dcaccesstojustice.org/access-public-funding/>.

efficient functioning of the civil legal system in DC, as more people face legal challenges unassisted.

And, to be clear, Black and brown District residents and children will bear the brunt of this cut. In 2024 Black District households earned just 36% of the median income of white District households,<sup>4</sup> and these trends will likely worsen once 2025 data becomes available, given the devastating impacts of federal layoffs and cuts to vital safety net programs like Medicaid and SNAP.<sup>5</sup> Child poverty in the District reached 28.1%, an 11.2% spike from 2023 to 2024 – the largest year-to-year increase in a decade.<sup>6</sup>

These ominous and worsening economic conditions exist in the backdrop of a difficult budgetary and political environment in the District. The federal government has passed devastating cuts to the social safety net and increased the complexity of these programs, making it difficult for state administration. Ramped up immigration enforcement has trampled residents' civil rights. Federal layoffs have made it harder for residents to receive basic customer service from federal agencies that administer benefits programs. And even at the local level, the District's dire budget has led to deep cuts to anti-poverty programs. In these circumstances, access to free civil legal services remains more urgent and important than ever.

ATJ funding for civil legal services operates as a supportive arm of the District's safety net of core programs like public housing and vouchers, homelessness services, Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and Alliance, and more.<sup>7</sup> The Mayor's proposals writ large threaten the integrity of DC's safety net just as residents need it most – including the legal services funded by ATJ.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Inequality Remained Extreme in 2024 as DC Backslid on Poverty*, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/inequality-remained-extreme-in-2024-as-dc-backslid-on-poverty/> (Sept. 15, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *DC Child Poverty Back to Extreme Level After Short-Lived Progress*, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/dc-child-poverty-back-to-extreme-level-after-short-lived-progress/> (Feb. 19, 2026).

<sup>7</sup> *Our Safety Net*, Fair Budget Coalition, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EQrH0Din71lpvTm\\_Mpo0Salwi\\_NN3vAR/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EQrH0Din71lpvTm_Mpo0Salwi_NN3vAR/view).

### **ATJ Fuels Legal Aid's Critical Services and Increases Capacity**

Legal Aid receives significant funding from OVSJG in the form of direct grants (to provide legal support to domestic violence survivors and returning citizens) and indirectly through the DC Bar Foundation. At Legal Aid alone, as supported by Access to Justice funds, we helped 6,000 District residents with legal issues in 2025. With the mayor's severe cut, Legal Aid would no longer be able to help 5,000 of those 6,000 District residents – people whose housing, safety, income, family, or future may be at stake.

ATJ funding supports 36 percent of Legal Aid's budget. If ATJ stays at the level in the mayor's budget, Legal Aid would need to lay off almost 40 staff members, including:

- 20 staff members who help people facing eviction and deplorable housing conditions;
- 9 staff members who help residents navigate the public benefits system, just as major SNAP and Medicaid changes are going into effect;
- 7 staff members who help survivors and families in domestic violence and family law cases;
- 2 staff members who protect consumers from predatory lenders and scams; and
- 1 staff member helping immigrants caught up in ramped-up enforcement.

These cuts would come at the exact moment that demand for civil legal services is rising. In 2025, Legal Aid handled 18% more cases than the year before. Through March 2026, we have already accepted more than 500 cases for full representation – 36% more than at this point last year. In March 2026, we saw our highest monthly intake total in five years. That is the central point: this program is working. The Council's investment built capacity, and Legal Aid uses that capacity to serve more people in need.

### **ATJ Funds Empower Survivors of Domestic Violence and District Families**

The combined cuts to Access to Justice and victim services funding will have a particularly negative impact on survivors of domestic violence. Our Family Law and Domestic Violence Unit assists clients in moving towards lasting safety and independence for themselves and their children. Our attorneys are experts in a diverse array of matters, from Civil Protection Orders, custody, divorce, child support, and parentage cases. This Unit also works closely with our Immigration Unit, assisting clients

at the intersection of domestic violence and immigration law – namely, survivors of domestic violence who may be eligible for legal status. In 2025, the Family Law and Domestic Violence Unit conducted more than 650 domestic violence and almost 1,300 family law intakes, closing more than 500 cases in both areas. Our attorneys have also played a leading role in coalitions advocating for the District’s upcoming reforms to TANF, ensuring families receive a larger share of their child support payments, and in pushing for the pause of child support collections from incarcerated parents who have no ability to pay. Through this complex and integral work, our attorneys support custodial and non-custodial parents alike, fighting back against insurmountable debt and barriers to reentry while helping District families receive the money they deserve. Without ATJ funding, as noted above, our capacity to do this essential work will be significantly diminished – reducing this Unit’s staffing by almost a quarter and significantly hurting the crime victims they serve.

### **ATJ Funds Unlock Private Investment and Increase Legal Representation**

Access to Justice funding also unlocks significant private investment for Legal Aid. Nearly 200 of Legal Aid’s pro bono volunteers submitted a letter describing Access to Justice as a “force multiplier in social services in DC.”<sup>8</sup> In 2025, pro bono lawyers provided more than 28,500 hours of service in partnership with Legal Aid, helping clients with eviction, housing conditions, domestic violence, child custody, debt collection, public benefits, and criminal record sealing matters. But their letter makes clear that their work depends on Legal Aid’s infrastructure – our intake, screening, training, mentoring, and expertise. Without ATJ funds, Legal Aid’s essential legal services infrastructure, built over decades will diminish, as will our ability to refer hundreds of pro bono cases to attorneys willing to donate their time. The massive private investment and increased legal representation by private attorneys will be lost, and District residents will suffer the consequences.

### **Conclusion**

ATJ’s baseline is the current level of services thousands of DC residents rely on right now: funded at \$32 million in FY2026. . If the Council does not restore ATJ funding there will be fewer lawyers, fewer cases accepted, fewer pro bono referrals, and more people facing legal issues in court alone.

---

<sup>8</sup> Legal Aid DC Pro Bono Volunteer Letter (Apr. 20, 2026), *available at* <https://www.legalaiddc.org/sites/default/files/2026-05/Pro%20Bono%20Volunteer%20Letter%20to%20Support%20ATJ%20Restoration.pdf>.

We urge the Council to restore ATJ funds in FY2027 to \$32 million, and we similarly urge the Council to reject the mayor's proposed cuts to Victim Services – critically important services that support survivors of domestic violence. As you heard in our testimony during performance oversight season, Legal Aid is making a significant impact on our client community and the District as a whole. Put plainly, we cannot do our work and serve our clients without this essential funding.