

Access to Justice Initiative – Budget Oversight Hearing FY 26
Committee of the Whole
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Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs

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I am Sarah Bessell, Supervisory Counsel at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs.

Access to Justice funds are a critical component for creating a more just city, and effective legal advocacy that brings immense value to District residents.

ATJ funding allows the Washington Lawyers Committee to serve over 2,200 low-income, D.C. residents each year, across all eight wards.

With ATJ funds, our weekly Workers' Rights Clinic provides comprehensive, pro bono legal advice and brief services to over 300 D.C. residents a year. We also train hundreds of people on their rights in the workplace. These workers face wage theft, discrimination in the workplace, are denied sick leave under D.C. law, and experience other workplace violations. Through the clinic, our staff and volunteers negotiate significant settlements on behalf of workers terminated unlawfully; recover lost wages for workers when their employers steal from them; and successfully advise clients on how to advocate for their rights to sick leave and other rights.

When workplace rights are enforced, D.C. residents are paid, healthy, and work with dignity.

With ATJ funds, the Committee's housing justice team serves nearly 200 low-income District residents a year in need of housing legal services. We work with tenant collectives to fight for safe, habitable housing that is free of pervasive mold, collapsing ceilings, and rampant bed bug, roach and rat infestations. We sue landlords who violate D.C. law by engaging in discriminatory tenant screening practices that exclude housing voucher

holders and returning citizens. When landlords deny accessible housing for people with disabilities, we take them to court.

When housing rights are enforced, D.C. residents are not displaced to other states, they can live in D.C. in fair and safe conditions.

The proposed drastic reduction in funding would severely impact the Committees' ability to provide desperately needed services in the critical areas of workers' rights, housing justice, and disability rights. The workers who come to the Workers' Rights Clinic cannot afford an attorney. There is no other clinic of this kind serving the District—without ATJ funding there will be nowhere for these workers to go. Without ATJ funding, D.C. families will lose access to legal services that ensure safe, habitable, and affordable housing.

The ATJ program is a lifeline that keeps D.C. families in housing and workers employed. We urge the Council to restore full funding of ATJ, so justice and equality can be made real for all D.C. residents, not just those who can afford it.