



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS

Access to Justice Initiative – Budget Oversight Hearing FY26
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety

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I am Joanne Lin, the Exec. Director of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs ("WLC"). It is an honor to submit this testimony about the critical import of the Access to Justice ("ATJ") program.

Thank you for prioritizing ATJ and for working valiantly to provide full funding for ATJ in recent years. Your leadership and collective investment in ATJ have been a gamechanger for justice and equality in DC.

At WLC, ATJ is our single largest source of funding, comprising about 28 percent of our revenue. The ATJ funding supports our strategic litigation to advance workers' rights, housing justice, and disability rights. Through your investment in ATJ, we now serve over 2200 DC residents each year, from across the city.

Workers' Rights Clinic: Our weekly Workers' Rights Clinic is the only DC clinic offering comprehensive pro bono legal advice on workers' rights issues. We operate virtual clinics, as well as in-person clinics at Bread for the City in



Anacostia. Our trained volunteers advise workers experiencing wage theft, sexual harassment, and retaliatory termination. We do not screen for income, ward, or immigration status, and are therefore able to serve residents from all eight wards.

Fair Housing: ATJ also supports our housing justice litigation, which involves three components:

- 1) We open the doors to accessible housing for people with disabilities. We sue landlords who are denying full and equal access to properties for people in wheelchairs.
- 2) We also sue landlords who routinely violate DC law by illegally discriminating based on race, source of income, and criminal history. We challenge discriminatory tenant screening practices that exclude housing voucher holders and returning citizens.
- 3) We work with tenant collectives who are fighting to end hazardous housing conditions, including pervasive mold, collapsing ceilings, rampant bed bug, roach and rat infestations.

Taken together, our housing justice litigation has directly impacted tenants in Wards 1, 2, 3, and 5.



Return on Investment (“ROI”): Through the ATJ funding, we function as a force-multiplier for justice and equality in DC. Since 1968, our business model has involved close partnership with the private bar. Whether we’re suing landlords for deplorable housing conditions or suing restaurant owners who have stolen wages from their workers – every action we take involves direct engagement with the nation’s leading law firms.

For every dollar of ATJ funding received, we’re able to leverage an additional 25 dollars in pro bono support from DC firms.

Put another way, I recently met with two different firms engaged in pro bono litigation with us. One firm had assigned 26 lawyers to our case. The other firm had assigned 28 lawyers to another one of our cases. At Washington Lawyers’ Committee, the total number of staff attorneys comes to 10 -- to cover all of our cases! By pairing one of our attorneys with 25 firm lawyers, we’re able to build large pro bono teams with the expertise and resources needed to tackle the most intractable civil rights challenges of our time.



So, what does success look like?

- Reaching a successful settlement with a Columbia Heights landlord to ensure that dozens of Latino families can live in safe habitable conditions and their children can remain in DC public schools.
- Opening the doors to affordable quality housing for low-income renters, returning citizens, people with disabilities – so that people of all backgrounds can call DC home.
- Ensuring that workers get paid their full wages and can work in places free of sexual harassment and retaliatory termination. Fair wages lead to stable families and strong neighborhoods.

This is what success looks like. And it is made possible by your investment in ATJ.

The ATJ program is a lifeline that keeps families in housing, kids in schools, and workers employed -- thereby reducing pressure on emergency services and improving the safety and security of all of DC. We urge the Council to restore full funding of ATJ, so justice and equality can be made real for all DC residents, not just those who can afford it.