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**Legal Community Joins Together to Urge Lawmakers to Maintain Funding for Civil Legal Aid**  
*General counsel, law school deans, law firm managing partners and retired judges deliver letters to Governor Patrick and legislative leaders*

BOSTON (March 13, 2009) – In the only initiative of its kind in the country, some of the most prominent representatives of the Massachusetts legal community have joined together to urge Governor Patrick and the legislature to maintain funding for civil legal aid in the Commonwealth’s FY10 budget.

The initiative is especially critical this year due to the funding crisis facing civil legal aid. The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC), which funds 17 legal aid programs that provide information, advice and representation to low-income people with critical, non-criminal legal problems threatening their families, incomes, health care, and housing, has cut grants by 40 percent this fiscal year, while calls for assistance to some programs are up by 30 percent. The cuts are due to the 54 percent drop in MLAC’s other source of funding, the Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program, which is tied to the federal interest rate.

In separate letters delivered to Governor Patrick and legislative leaders between January and March, the signatories asked for civil legal aid to be protected from further cuts, through level funding of MLAC’s appropriation, budget line item 0321-1600 (\$11,070,424 in FY09).

“We are enormously grateful to have such wide-ranging support,” says Julia Huston, chair of the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC). “These letters illustrate that all sectors of the Massachusetts legal community embrace the notion that adequately funded civil legal assistance is fundamental to the concept of justice in our society.”

The letter-writing campaign includes the four letters described below, all of which are available at <http://www.equaljusticecoalition.org>.

- On March 10, eight law school deans from the following schools delivered their letter: Boston College Law School, Boston University School of Law, Harvard Law School, New England Law | Boston, Northeastern University School of Law, Southern New England School of Law, Suffolk University Law School and Western New England College School of Law.
- On March 9, twenty-four retired judges delivered their letter. The signatories include former Chief Justice Herbert Wilkins of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, as

well as five other former SJC justices: Hon. Ruth Abrams, Hon. Charles Fried, Hon. John Greaney, Hon. Neil Lynch and Hon. Joseph Nolan.

- On February 19, general counsel from 107 corporations and institutions doing business in Massachusetts delivered their letter. This initiative began in 2000, and since then, the number of signatories has grown from 15 the first year to 107 this year. Key signatories include the top attorneys from General Electric Company, NSTAR, Reebok International Ltd., Staples, Inc., Stop & Shop, Verizon Communications, Inc. and Welch Foods Inc.
- On January 16, the managing partners of 38 Massachusetts law firms delivered their letter.

"As attorneys, we see the consequences of the lack of equal access to the court system. Low-income individuals and the elderly are forced to navigate complex legal proceedings on their own, often with dire results for them and their families," says John A. Nadas, co-managing partner, Choate Hall & Stewart LLP. "Despite the numerous hours of *pro bono* counsel provided by private attorneys, there is still a significant gap in legal services that can only be filled through adequate state funding of civil legal aid."

"As we teach all young lawyers, 'equal protection under the law' is a cornerstone of our democracy. But access to justice is essential to ensure that equal protection is a reality," says Dean Emily Spieler of Northeastern University School of Law. "If people cannot afford lawyers, and we don't fund legal services, we are failing to lay one crucial cornerstone of the foundation for justice in Massachusetts. Adequate state funding for civil legal aid programs is absolutely critical to make 'equal protection under the law' meaningful."

#### **About the Equal Justice Coalition (EJC)**

The Equal Justice Coalition was created in 1999 by the Boston Bar Association, Massachusetts Bar Association, and Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation to expand access to justice in Massachusetts through support for state funding of civil legal aid. For more information, visit <http://www.equaljusticecoalition.org>.

#### **About the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC)**

The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation was established by the state legislature in 1983 to ensure that low-income people with critical, non-criminal legal problems would have access to legal information, advice and representation. It is the largest funding source for civil legal aid programs in Massachusetts. For more information, visit <http://www.mlac.org>.

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