



ROGER JUAN MALDONADO
PRESIDENT
rmaldonado@sgrlaw.com

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Via E-Mail & Facsimile

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Re: Maintain Funding Levels for Legal Services Programs

Dear Governor Cuomo,

As President of the New York City Bar Association, I, and my predecessors, have been very involved in efforts to expand access to counsel in civil matters affecting low income New Yorkers. The City Bar has been a strong supporter of the Office of Court Administration's Judiciary Civil Legal Services program, which funds legal services, pro bono programs including the City Bar Justice Center, and other programs addressing the unmet legal needs statewide of disadvantaged populations. I write at this time to urge you to do all that is necessary to maintain, and not reduce, current funding levels for these crucial access to justice programs at this time of increased needs.

Since the start of the pandemic, civil legal services organizations have pivoted their services to focus on the most pressing needs brought on by COVID-19, including unemployment, domestic violence and housing. Specifically, programs across the state have shifted to remote services including online intake, brief advice, and collection and dissemination of resources on common legal issues. Programs have established remote pro bono projects to provide COVID-19 related unemployment assistance and small business counseling, as well as Legal Hotlines to answer basic legal questions arising out of COVID-19 and to access assistance with wills and estates. These services will be crucial to economic recovery throughout the state.

Programs also continue to provide legal services on issues that are not related to COVID-19, issues that have taken on even greater importance to low-income communities in these difficult times. These include adjusting legal status for Temporary Protected Persons in the U.S., representation at appeals hearings for people who need social security disability, and navigating medical appeals and debts. These cases are often complex, requiring specialized knowledge of the law and familiarity with the communities in need. In addition, we know from the last recession that consumer bankruptcy, consumer debt and foreclosure will be included in the next wave of cases to emerge by the Fall. Legal services providers will help to stabilize families during what we know will be a long and deeply challenging recovery.

We understand that New York State will be seeking to balance significant revenue shortfalls and we ask that you please ensure that the recovery allows the nonprofit legal services community to do what it does best – ensure that low-income communities are fully represented and not unduly shouldering the burden of this pandemic. The work of legal services providers also helps, in many cases, to bring in federal money, including veterans’ benefits and social security and supplemental security income benefits. Reductions to legal services programs will undermine our ability to access those federal monies and to meet the needs of families hit the hardest by the coronavirus pandemic.

We know that, in the end, unattended legal problems often lead to higher costs for everyone. Governor Cuomo, for these reasons, we urge you to let legal services providers continue their work without having to absorb funding cuts at this crucial time.

Respectfully,



Roger Juan Maldonado
President