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**Written Testimony submitted on behalf of the**

**Legal Services Access Alliance**

**Presented by**

**Nic Rangel, Executive Director**

**at Legal Aid Society of Northeastern NY**

**to**

**New York State Senate Finance Committee**

**and**

**Assembly Ways and Means Committee**

**2024 Joint Budget Hearing on Human Services**

**Wednesday, February 12, 2025**

The Legal Services Access Alliance represents seven of the largest providers of free civil legal services outside of New York City and includes Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Assistance of Western New York, Legal Services of Central New York, Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, Legal Services of Hudson Valley, and Legal Services of Long Island.

We collectively serve every county outside of New York City and employ over 900 legal services workers. We have two main budget requests we would like to present to the Committees for consideration.

### **1. Continue Support for Legal Services for Evictions**

We are deeply grateful for Governor Hochul's continued commitment of \$35 million in funding in the Executive Budget for the Legal Representation for Eviction Services Program, also known as the Eviction Defense and Housing Stability Program. This vital program provides essential legal services and representation for eviction cases outside of New York City.

The Legislature's additional appropriation of \$15 million over the past two years to expand this program further to NYC and other areas throughout New York has been transformative, and we are profoundly appreciative of this support. We need these funds to continue to maintain services to our clients at current levels.

The Office for Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) has proven to be an excellent partner in administering this program, bringing their expertise in serving those facing housing instability to ensure effective implementation. Through this State support, Alliance members and partner organizations have achieved significant outcomes:

- Expanded legal services networks into previously underserved areas, including city, town, and village courts in rural counties. Collectively, we have partnered with 25 other organizations through subcontracts that support provide legal

services, conduct outreach, provide education, and community-based direct services.

- Strengthened partnerships with local law schools to develop a pipeline of future civil legal service providers. We have partnered with law schools in each of our communities to support the development of housing justice clinics, internship programs, and created paid Justice Fellowships for students interested in public interest jobs.
- Implemented comprehensive statewide training programs to establish best practices in eviction representation.
- Established a toll-free hotline system connecting tenants with appropriate legal services in their area.
- Development of a statewide intake portal through federal grant funding to improve access to legal representation.

Our member organizations serve vulnerable New Yorkers across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Working alongside local partners in each service area, we continue to build the foundational infrastructure necessary for an eventual statewide right to counsel in landlord/tenant matters. The impact of this program has been profound, helping over 100,000 individuals and family members in the 57 counties outside of NYC, closing over 43,000 cases since the inception of the program.

As housing costs continue to rise and eviction cases persist at concerning levels, the need for these legal services remains critical. The program has demonstrated its effectiveness in preventing unnecessary evictions, promoting housing stability, and ensuring fair treatment under the law for all New Yorkers.

This funding is essential to maintain and build upon the progress we have made in addressing New York's housing crisis through legal representation and eviction prevention services.

## **2025-26 Budget Request**

- We respectfully request continued support of \$35 million for the Legal Representation for Eviction Services Program for every county outside of NYC.
- We respectfully request continued support of a \$15 million legislative addition to the budget to maintain this expanded program in NYC and every county outside of NYC.

## **2. Support Funding for the Homeowner Protection Program**

We are grateful for Governor Hochul’s budget proposal to provide the support needed to address the housing crisis and build additional housing stock. We are pleased to see that the Homeowners Protection Program (HOPP) was included in the Executive budget recognizing the importance of providing New Yorkers with the full range of legal services available to preserve housing for our most vulnerable neighbors.

HOPP funds over 90 nonprofit legal services and housing counseling agencies, serving every county across New York. These community-based organizations employ hundreds of specially trained lawyers and housing counselors to provide direct services to families facing threats to homeownership.

## **2025-26 Budget Request**

- We respectfully request the Legislature’s support of the Governor’s allocation of \$40 million for the Homeowners Protection Program (HOPP).

## **3. Additional Funding for the IOLA Fund**

We are grateful to Governor Hochul for allowing the IOLA Fund to access \$77.5 million dollars that is available to be used from the fiduciary fund designated to fund civil legal services work throughout the state,

including housing preservation work in our communities. The IOLA fund is in the midst of a significant investment to improve the infrastructure for the delivery of civil legal services to residents of the entire state. We are thankful that these funds, which are not taxpayer dollars, are being made available for this important investment.

**2025-26 Budget Request**

- We respectfully request the Legislature’s include an additional \$2.5 million in funding in the enacted budget to fully fund all civil legal services programs and investment in New York State’s justice infrastructure. This funding is available from revenue generated by the IOLA fund which we have been told, they have also requested.

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Now more than ever the stability and timeliness of state funding is essential to maintain these critical legal services and our ability to serve vulnerable populations in New York.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these budget requests. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.