



"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." – Cornel West

THURSDAY February 13, 2025

TESTIMONY OF THE NEW YORK LEGAL SERVICES COALITION

**PRESENTED TO THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE AND
THE ASSEMBLY WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE**

JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON PUBLIC PROTECTION

Thank you, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow and honorable members of the legislature, for the opportunity to submit this testimony to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection. I am Sal Curran, the Executive Director of Volunteer Lawyers Project of Central New York and the Co-Chair of the Policy & Advocacy Committee of the New York Legal Services Coalition (NYLSC), which represents civil legal services providers and their clients. Collectively, NYLSC members provide representation to low-income New Yorkers in each region of the state in the areas of family law, domestic violence, immigration, housing, public benefits, consumer issues, elder law, and LGBTQIA + rights.

The Coalition and our members are driven by one core mission: advancing access to justice. This means ensuring that all New Yorkers – particularly low-income populations and communities of color – have legal representation when they need it. While we have made strides in this area, thanks to our partners in the Court System, legislature, Attorney General's Office, and Executive, there is much more work to be done.

In order to close the justice gap, we must focus on strengthening the foundation of civil legal services – our professional workforce. Across the state, organizations are struggling to hire and retain attorneys. This is largely due to the inability of organizations to offer competitive salary and benefits package, especially when compared to comparable positions in state and municipal government, as well as the private sector. NYLSC recently undertook a project comparing the pay of civil legal services attorneys to comparable Assistant Attorney General (AAG) positions within the Attorney General's Office (see attached white paper and one-pager).

The results demonstrate a shocking chasm:




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- In NYC, an AAG makes a starting salary of \$90,000 compared to the average of \$69,000 for the same position at a CLS provider. After 10 years, an AAG earns \$134,000 per year, while the 10-year veteran at a CLS organization earns \$92,000.
- In “rest of state”, the gap is even wider. A first-year AAG makes \$87,000 to a civil legal services attorneys \$59,000 salary. After 10 years, an AAG earns \$131,000 compared to a \$74,000 annual wage for the CLS attorney.

Simply put, entry level pay is 30% to 45% lower than their government counterparts. Those inequities grow as careers advance – at ten years of service, the gaps in pay between civil legal services attorneys and AAGs are as much as 75% in some areas of the state. We are therefore calling for pay equity to justly compensate our workforce. It is the only way that we will ever make great strides in closing the justice gap.

I now note our positions on the SFY 2026 Executive Budget:

1. Support \$150M for Judiciary Civil Legal Services as proposed in the Judiciary Budget;
2. Add \$2.5M to the  \$5M appropriation (\$80M total) for the Interest on Lawyers Account (IOLA) Fund to support its grantees and accept budget language designating IOLA as “fiduciary fund”;
3. Restore traditional legislative adds for civil legal services, including designated funding for domestic violence legal services; and
4. Redirect \$2.83M of the revenue from the Legal Services Assistance Fund (LSAF) to its original purpose to support civil legal service programs with budget language assuring the same.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.