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Written Testimony submitted on behalf of the

Legal Services Access Alliance

by

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to

New York State Senate Finance Committee

and

Assembly Ways and Means Committee

**2026 Joint Budget Hearing on Human Services
Thursday, February 5, 2026**

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 (verify) legal services workers. We have three 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 Legal Services for Housing Stability Program. This vital program provides essential legal services and representation for eviction cases outside of New York City.

Last year, the Legislature's additional \$20 million allocation brought total funding to \$55 million and expanded this program further in NYC and other areas throughout New York. This initiative 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 been 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 and provide legal services,

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

- Strengthened partnerships with 6 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 35 students interested in public interest jobs.
- Implemented comprehensive statewide training programs to establish best practices in eviction representation. To date, over 698 individuals have been trained during our second training series. Additionally, the Alliance hosts annual trial skills development trainings and has trained 102 attorneys through this program.
- Established a toll-free hotline system connecting tenants with appropriate legal services in their area.
- Developed a statewide intake portal through a \$270,000 federal grant to improve access to legal representation, and most importantly;

We have served 137,156 persons under this program, and 75,181 cases were closed by Alliance members and their subcontractors.

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.

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 prevention services.

2026-27 Budget Request

- We respectfully request continued baseline support of \$35 million for the Legal Representation for Eviction Services Program for every county outside of NYC.
- We respectfully request an additional \$10 million legislative addition to the budget to maintain this expanded program for every county outside of NYC (rest of state).
- This funding will support 31 collaborating organizations serving all 57 counties outside NYC and reaching 137,156 individuals, as mentioned above. This funding keeps families housed, prevents displacement, and strengthens communities by promoting long-term housing stability and reducing strain on local systems.

2. Support Funding for the Homeowner Protection Program

We are grateful for Governor Hochul's budget proposal to continue to provide the support needed to address the housing crisis and build additional housing stock. We are pleased to again 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.

2026-27 Budget Request

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

3. Additional Support for the IOLA Fund

We are grateful to Governor Hochul for appropriating the IOLA Fund \$80.86 million dollars to be used from the fiduciary fund, which is not taxpayer dollars, designated to fund civil legal services work throughout the state, including housing preservation work in our communities. Additionally, 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 through its Justice Infrastructure Project and Training Center. However, the proposed level of support represents a \$25 million shortfall to IOLA's planned core grantmaking for FY27 and planned infrastructure investments, which totaled \$102.5 million.

If this additional funding is not incorporated into the final budget, IOLA will need to make a 20% reduction to Year 2 Operating Grant budgets for their grantees, the Justice Infrastructure Project and Training Center contracts will need to be indefinitely paused.

2026-27 Budget Request

- We respectfully request the Legislature add \$25 million in funding, which is not taxpayer dollars, to the budget to fully fund all civil legal services programs and investment in New York State's justice infrastructure grant making program. Again, 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.