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Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the FY2027 Executive Budget Proposal **Topic: Public Protection**

Testimony of Christine M. Fecko, Esq., Executive Director, IOLA Fund of the State of New York

February 12, 2026

Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the FY2027 Executive Budget Proposal under the Public Protection topic. My name is Christine M. Fecko, and I serve as the Executive Director of the IOLA Fund of the State of New York (“IOLA”).

IOLA is an important statewide funder of civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. We support legal assistance that helps people avoid homelessness, escape domestic violence, secure safety and stability for their children, prevent exploitation, and address life-altering civil legal problems. For more than four decades, IOLA has played a vital role in advancing access to justice across New York State.

Most importantly, this work is not supported by taxpayer dollars. Our funding comes from the interest generated on lawyers’ escrow accounts. By providing grants to nonprofit legal service providers, we help ensure that individuals navigating housing, family, consumer, and public benefits matters can vindicate their rights with dignity and meaningful representation.

In addition to the individual benefit to clients, these services reduce the number of unrepresented litigants, improve court efficiency, and strengthen the fair administration of justice statewide.

When New Yorkers face eviction, domestic violence, elder abuse, unlawful debt collection, benefit denials, or immigration-related family crises, the consequences are not merely “legal.” They are immediate public protection concerns: loss of housing, exposure to violence, family separation, and destabilization can ripple through schools, shelters, hospitals, and our communities. Civil legal services are a proven tool that helps prevent these harms before they escalate into emergency interventions or even catastrophes that cost more and create deeper disruption.

We appreciate the Governor’s recognition of the importance of civil legal services and IOLA’s role in supporting providers statewide. However, the Executive Budget’s proposed \$77.5 million in Aid to Localities for IOLA’s core grantmaking is not sufficient to sustain current service levels statewide.

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IOLA's current grant cycle is based on five-year awards approved by our Board of Trustees. In FY27, providers will enter Year 2 of these commitments and have already staffed and planned services accordingly. To sustain these existing, multi-year obligations and maintain current service levels, IOLA requires \$102.5 million in this budget year.

To be clear, the gap between \$77.5 million and \$102.5 million threatens the stability of the civil legal services infrastructure upon which communities depend.

If the current budget level remains below what is needed to sustain the existing grant commitments, the practical consequences include:

- Staff reductions or unfilled vacancies at legal services organizations resulting in fewer New Yorkers served and longer wait times for help.
- Reduced capacity in high-impact areas tied directly to public protection: eviction prevention, domestic violence and family safety, benefits access, elder protection, and consumer defense.
- Strain on local systems, including courts managing more unrepresented litigants, and increased downstream pressure on shelters and other emergency supports when families cannot prevent crises early.
- Disruption to long-term planning, because providers cannot responsibly maintain staffing and programming when core funding is uncertain.

IOLA recognizes the fiscal pressures facing the State and approaches this request with a commitment to responsible stewardship of its fiduciary fund. Our Board has adopted a clear grantmaking framework and multi-year plan within its current and projected fund balance so that providers can deliver stable services across all regions. That stability is essential: civil legal services organizations cannot turn on and off like a faucet without serious consequences for staffing, community trust, and continuity of representation.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that the Legislature:

1. Increase IOLA's Aid to Localities appropriation for its core grantmaking from \$77.5 million to \$102.5 million so as to sustain current service levels statewide; and
2. Ensure budget actions support the stability and continuity of civil legal services as a core element of public protection.

Thank you for your attention to this vital public protection issue and for your continued partnership in protecting the rights, safety, and stability of New Yorkers statewide.

Sincerely,



Christine M. Fecko, Esq.
Executive Director
IOLA Fund of the State of New York