



## EXPANDING ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR 40 YEARS

MARYLAND HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE  
TESTIMONY OF MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE  
IN SUPPORT OF HB478: CIVIL CASES – SURCHARGES  
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021

Susan Francis  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Chair Clippinger and distinguished members of the Committee, thank for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of HB 478.

My name is Susan Francis and I am the Executive Director of the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS). Founded in 1981, Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS) is the state’s largest and oldest provider of pro bono civil legal services to Marylanders facing financial hardship. Since then, our statewide panel of over 1,600 volunteer attorneys and tax professionals has helped over 100,000 Marylanders resolve legal disputes from divorce and child custody to foreclosure prevention. In FY20, MVLS volunteer lawyers provided legal services to 4,459 Marylanders unable to afford a lawyer and affected 10,013 people in their households. The value of their volunteer hours was over \$6 million.

Our volunteers are part of an even larger network of pro bono efforts by Maryland lawyers. According to the most recent statewide statistics available from the Maryland Court of Appeals, 39.7 percent of all Maryland lawyers volunteered 1,229,131 hours and gave \$7.5 million in charitable contributions to legal services organizations that serve low-income Marylanders. As these figures reflect, the private bar in Maryland generously supports pro bono legal services. Unfortunately, the legal needs of low-income Marylanders far exceed the capacity of the private bar and other legal services organizations to meet that need. Pro bono programs and other legal services programs currently meet just twenty-two (22) percent of the need for legal services in Maryland. Providing access to justice for the remaining seventy-eight (78) percent of Marylanders who need a lawyer but are unable to afford one will require much more support.

Operating an effective pro bono program requires reliable funding. MVLS maintains a small staff of 29 lawyers, intake paralegals, administrative support and development staff. The infrastructure needed to screen over 450-500 potential clients a week for program eligibility is costly and includes a cloud-based for case management system and VOIP phone system with a call center. Our staff lawyers train and mentor volunteer lawyers and supervise our

paralegal staff. They also provide direct legal services on matters including housing issues, consumer debt, bankruptcy, criminal record relief, estate planning and administration and tax disputes. Our paralegals handle client intake and are responsible for placing cases with our panel of volunteer attorneys.

MVLS receives 41 percent of its funding from MLSC, the remainder of our \$3 million budget we raise from individual donors, corporate sponsorships, foundations and government grants. MLSC currently projects fiscal year 2022 revenue to come in at least \$6 million lower than pre-pandemic levels. However, the need for free legal services only continues to increase as Marylanders struggle with unemployment and risk of homelessness, under the weight of the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic as well as the ensuing financial devastation is disproportionately affecting communities of color, who were already often left behind by the justice system. With interest rates remaining low, Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) are providing little to no income to MLSC. An increase in filing fee surcharges would allow Maryland legal services providers to continue to help the flood of residents facing financial hardship that will come through our doors in the next months and years.

All Marylanders-regardless of their economic circumstances-deserve access to our courts and should be able to receive quality legal representation when needed. Unless MLSC receives adequate funding, MVLS and the 35 other legal services organizations that MLSC funds will be unable to provide even modest levels of access. As our clients frequently tell us, legal representation is often life changing. We support HB478 because it will provide critically important funding to programs like ours which are essential to ensuring that those that can't afford an attorney aren't left to navigate complex judicial matters on their own.

Mister Chair and members for the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony.