



**Association of Legal Aid Attorneys
UAW 2325 (AFL-CIO)**

568 Broadway, 702A
New York, NY 10012-3225
212.343.0708▼Fx 212.343.0966
alaa@alaa.org▼www.alaa.org



Testimony by the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys/UAW 2325

**The Mayor's Fiscal Year 2011
Budget Modification**

Presented before
The New York City Council

December 6, 2010

UAW Local 2325, the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (A.L.A.A.), welcomes this opportunity to testify at this hearing concerning the Mayor's proposed FY11 Budget Modification. A.L.A.A. is an amalgamated union, with approximately 810 members in our Legal Aid unit. Our testimony focuses on the Mayor's proposed budget modification to cut 5.4% from the City Council's FY 11 restorations for HPD's anti-illegal eviction funding and the consequences of this cut on our members and on low-income families and individuals they represent.

This funding prevents homelessness and improves housing conditions for at-risk individuals, seniors and working families. Without representation, our clients, the neediest New Yorkers, will be left without housing and out on the street. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of all tenants in housing court are unrepresented. 99%. The last time the office of court administration surveyed the percentage of unrepresented tenants, ten percent (10%) were represented. In the time of the most extreme economic conditions since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the percentage of tenants who have representation in housing court proceedings has plummeted to one percent. That means that only one out of one hundred tenant litigants entering housing court has an attorney representing them in their eviction proceedings. The other ninety-nine face the daunting task of preventing their eviction without the assistance of counsel.

We are mindful of the extreme financial difficulties that the City is facing. At the same time, these extraordinary economic conditions are having an especially harsh impact on low-income New Yorkers. As legislators serving constituents – many of whom are our clients – you know that the need for the legal help that The Legal Aid Society provides to these struggling families and individuals is increasing exponentially. For every one person that we are able to help, we turn away eight.

At times like these, government must act to strengthen the safety nets that are in place to help protect those who are in greatest need. The Legal Aid Society is a vital part of that safety net to the communities that we serve. But now, when we need to have our programs strengthened, we are losing the support as our funding is constantly being chipped away.

Due to the extraordinary efforts of our committed members, we have managed to provide the same level of services. Still, we must turn away families and individuals who desperately need our help because we don't have enough staff or resources. Saying "no" to these families, to these mothers, to these children, to these individuals, is the toughest part of our jobs. It's much harder than the long hours we spend doing legal research, drafting papers, representing tenants in housing court, and advocating with governmental agencies and adversaries to protect our clients' rights. But without funding, every day, our members have to turn away families facing eviction and homelessness. Our members dedicate themselves to serving these clients and winning these cases -- to turn these people away when we could have helped them win their case is heartbreaking to us.

Ultimately, all New Yorkers will bear increased costs when our lack of funding prevents us from representing tenants in housing court. For every dollar spent on anti-eviction services, the City saves \$4 in shelter costs. Rejecting this proposed cut will decrease the deficit.

Finally, I would like to stress one crucial fact. Despite our size, we simply cannot absorb any further reductions in funding; we have been cut to the bone. This is our situation precisely when there is need for our services on a scale not seen since the Depression. Nor can these budget gaps be filled on the backs of our members. The Society has already been running as lean as possible due to the budget cuts we have already sustained the past several years. We have nothing left to cut.

Any further reduction in funding will not only result in a disruption of services, but will also most likely result in layoffs of our members. Our members have been sacrificing for years due to the constant underfunding of civil legal services programs like Legal Aid. As you know, A.L.A.A. members work under very stressful conditions for low wages in comparison to what they could earn in the private sector. The money saving policies that many companies have only now put in place this past year have been in effect at Legal Aid for years.

Our members began contributing to their healthcare plans years ago, only to face increasing costs each year. Unlike many of our brothers and sisters in the public sector, we do not have a defined-benefit pension. We have given up many other wage incentive benefits over the years and have been working under a wage freeze this past year. We have done all of this in an effort to help alleviate the harm done by the City and State's constant underfunding of our programs.

In these severe economic times, our clients need protection from evictions more than ever. We thank you for the vital support that you have given to Legal Aid in the past, and we ask that you reject the Mayor's plan to cut the Council's allocation for the HPD anti eviction legal assistance program.

Submitted by:

Deborah Wright
President
U.A.W. Local 2325 – Association of Legal Aid
Attorneys
568 Broadway, Suite 702a
New York, New York 10012
Tel: 212-343-0708
Fax: 212-343-0966
dwright@legal-aid.org