

Remarks by Supreme Judicial Court
Chief Justice Ralph D. Gants

17th Annual Walk to the Hill

Massachusetts State House
Great Hall of Flags
January 28, 2016

In a few minutes, you will meet with legislators and members of their staff to ask them to increase the state appropriation for civil legal services from \$17 million to \$27 million. And many will ask you, "How can we afford an increase of that size during a challenging budget season?" And you will answer, "How can we afford not to?"

In the words of Bryan Stevenson in his powerful book, "Just Mercy":

"[T]he true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."

The amount we invest as a Commonwealth in civil legal services is the measure of our true commitment to equal justice. We can declare that we believe in equal justice, we can proudly recite the Pledge of Allegiance's declaration that we are a nation "with liberty and justice for all," but if we do not put our money where our mouth is, all our words mean nothing.

And look at how little we are asking for. \$17 million is less than the cost of one subway ride with a Charlie ticket per Massachusetts resident per year. Not per day, per year. \$27 million is just \$4.00 per Massachusetts resident per year -- less than the cost of a round trip ticket. All we are saying is, "Bring Charlie home."

Do you know how much the New York State Legislature currently appropriates per resident per year for civil legal aid? \$4.30. We in Massachusetts hate to get beaten by New York in anything; we should hate to get beaten by them in civil legal aid. \$27 million will not even allow us to surpass New York's per

capita contribution to civil legal aid; it will just bring us closer. So if they say, "You ask for too much," you should answer, "How can we be asking for too much if we ask for less than New York currently provides?"

Increasing the appropriation for civil legal aid is also a brilliant investment for the Commonwealth. Show them the Boston Bar Association Task Force Report: \$1 dollar invested in legal aid in eviction and foreclosure cases returns \$2.69 in homelessness costs; \$1 dollar invested in representation for domestic violence victims saves \$1 in state medical costs; \$1 dollar invested in helping our residents obtain the federal benefits to which they are entitled by law brings in \$5 in federal benefits to this Commonwealth.

Today is the 100th anniversary of President Woodrow Wilson's nomination of Louis Brandeis to the United States Supreme Court. Brandeis said in 1905, "We hear much of the 'corporation lawyer,' and far too little of the 'people's lawyer.'" That is as true today as it was then. Civil legal services are the "people's lawyers." The tragedy is that we have far too few of them. Supporting civil legal aid, supporting the "people's lawyers" is the right thing to do, the reasonable thing to do, the smart thing to do. So it is right and reasonable and smart to ask our legislators to get it done.