

WALK TO THE HILL
to support the
Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation

Remarks by,
Ralph D. Gants
Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court

January 25, 2018, 11:30 A.M.
State House
Boston, Massachusetts

I am hardly the first to observe that the true measure of a nation's greatness is how it treats its most vulnerable residents. The same holds true for a Commonwealth. Two nights ago, I attended the Governor's State of the Commonwealth address and saw a body politic committed to working collaboratively to address the many problems that we confront, and to leave no one behind:

- not the approximately 880,000 residents of Massachusetts with family incomes at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level (roughly 1 in 8 of the residents of this Commonwealth),
- not the approximately 680,000 of our residents (roughly 1 in 10) who are not U.S. citizens,
- not the approximately 12,000 residents from El Salvador, Haiti, and Honduras who have recently lost their Temporary Protected Status, and the approximately 8,000 U.S. citizens who are their children and now face the deportation of their parents,
- not the approximately 8,000 residents with approved DACA applications who are waiting to learn whether they will be sent to a country they never knew or have long forgotten,
- not the thousands of our residents who have come to us in recent months from Puerto Rico as a result of the diaspora that followed the hurricanes.

In concluding his remarks, the Governor told the Legislature, "I don't think I'm being too simplistic when I say we are all here to help people." He spoke of helping people "[t]o believe in their own future and the future for their kids and their families." And he concluded, "But we also want people to believe in their government." Today, you will offer our Legislators the opportunity to put those words into action.

You will not ask them for much; just \$23 million. It is not nearly enough. Legal aid programs right now must turn away nearly 2 out of 3 income-eligible people who come to them for help because they simply do not have the lawyers they need to handle their cases. But the programs do more than represent clients; they support the entire civil legal aid infrastructure. Legal aid programs provide the training that allows pro bono attorneys, including many in this hall, to learn what they need to know when they volunteer to help those in need. And through websites such as masslegalthelp.org, they provide the legal information that the unrepresented rely upon when they have no other choice than to attempt to represent themselves.

Why \$5 million more than last year? Last year, Elsa, a 45-year-old TPS holder from El Salvador who cleans Boston offices from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m., and who takes care of her two sons, both U.S. citizens, during the rest of her waking hours, was not faced with being forced to return to El Salvador and to leave her children. Last year, Jackeline, age 16, a U.S. citizen with TPS parents, who hopes to become an architect, did not have to worry that she might have to drop out of high school to support her younger sisters after her parents are deported. Last year, Valeria, a DACA "dreamer" who is a sophomore at Northeastern University and has lived in this country since she was seven, did not feel betrayed by the country she calls home.

It has never been more important for our brothers and sisters who are poor, undocumented, or displaced, to have access to attorneys who can enforce and defend their rights, articulate their claims and defenses, and advocate their cause. Thank you for helping our Legislators demonstrate the greatness of this Commonwealth by empowering our most vulnerable residents through the advocacy of civil legal aid.