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Contact:

Redmond Haskins, The Legal Aid Society, [rhaskins@legal-aid.org](mailto:rhaskins@legal-aid.org)

Emily Whitfield, Neighborhood Defender Service, [ewhitfield@ndsny.org](mailto:ewhitfield@ndsny.org)

Daniel Ball, Brooklyn Defender Services, [Dball@bds.org](mailto:Dball@bds.org)

Mai Tran, The Bronx Defenders, [MTran@bronxdefenders.org](mailto:MTran@bronxdefenders.org)

Lupe Todd-Medina, New York County Defender Services, [LToddmedina@nycds.org](mailto:LToddmedina@nycds.org)

Hettie Powell, Queens Defenders, [hpowell@queensdefenders.org](mailto:hpowell@queensdefenders.org)

Seth Hoy, Legal Services NYC, [shoy@lsnyc.org](mailto:shoy@lsnyc.org)

**\*\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\*\***

***Defenders and Legal Services Organizations, Currently Facing Dire Staffing, Operational Funding Needs, Call on Mayor Adams, Speaker Adams and City Council Members for Increased Resources in the Fiscal Year 2023 Budget***

(NEW YORK, NY) – The Legal Aid Society, The Bronx Defenders, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, New York County Defender Services, Brooklyn Defender Services and Queens Defenders, among a number of organizations that provide constitutionally and/or legally required defense and civil legal services representation, [called](#) on Mayor Eric Adams, Speaker Adams and City Council Members to prioritize fully funding the invaluable work of staff and the operational needs in the Fiscal Year 2023 budget.

City Hall made an extraordinary commitment to addressing the recruitment and retention issues in these offices in 2019 when it agreed to supplement existing program revenue with a “parity” supplement for the most junior attorneys at these organizations which brought them into parity with Corporation Counsel, attorneys who represent the City on legal matters. The City’s public announcement of funding to increase salaries for more junior staff in 2019 came with a commitment to continue to address the recruitment and retention issues for more senior staff over a “four-year full implementation plan.” However, the City never followed through on that commitment.

Moreover, year-over-year costs for rent, healthcare, salary and pension, technology, and other operating needs have continued to rise. At the same time that the City seeks to expand mandated legal services, it has not provided additional funding to account for these increased costs. For The Legal Aid Society alone, annual costs increase each year by at least 3 percent due to rising healthcare costs, collective bargaining increases and rent increases – requiring an allocation from the City of \$10 million for just Fiscal Year 2023.

Without additional funding, defender and legal services organizations have had to manage these cost increases by not replacing staff who leave and delaying essential investments critical to the safe and effective delivery of services to clients, such as technology. Neither the Corporation Counsel nor any City agency has had to make these trade-offs since their cost escalations are covered by the City separate from the operating dollars provided to each agency.

Beyond year-over-year cost increases, many of the defender and civil legal service providers’ contracts fall far short of covering the existing programmatic costs necessary to provide quality representation – including not only attorneys, but also legal supervision, paralegals, and other support. These shortfalls grew even larger after the justice-improving pretrial measures that were ushered into law in 2019, including discovery reform. However, these reforms have not come with the necessary funding to properly implement them, including the need for new technology and additional staffing. These funding constraints combined with delays in contract registration create major cash flow challenges.

This perpetual underfunding has contributed to a significant departure of staff from our organizations and widespread vacancies. According to internal data collected from the above organizations, attrition rates are double digit, and in some cases up to roughly 25 percent, and many have reported increases in attrition of approximately 70 percent to more than 200 percent compared to last year. These defender organizations are on track to lose at least 348 staff for the current fiscal year ending June 30, 2022. And that does not include at least a dozen other civil legal services providers citywide that help with housing, immigration, consumer, employer, and other civil legal services.

Legal Aid alone, which currently employs roughly 2,000 people, has nearly 500 positions that need to be filled across the organization over the coming year, and other providers have identified similar vacancy rates.

The City's rising cost of living, skyrocketing inflation, and burden of student loans will only exacerbate the hiring and retention issues being faced.

“A budget reflects values and priorities, and if City Hall values the critical role public defenders and civil legal services providers play in New York City, any agreed-upon budget must include funding to fully compensate staff and meet the operational demands of these organizations,” said **Twyla Carter, Incoming Attorney-In-Chief and CEO of The Legal Aid Society**. “Mayor Adams has talked a lot about how our justice system must fully function, emphasizing the needs of law enforcement, but we are a part of that system too, and when the scales of justice tilt towards one side, people suffer, and those New Yorkers are often some of our most vulnerable neighbors.”

“By failing to close the salary gap between City Attorneys and public defenders, the City is essentially putting its thumb on the scales of justice,” said **Alice Fontier, Managing Director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**. “As with so many other budget issues, low-income New Yorkers will bear the brunt of this continued economic shortfall.”

“Today, the City is failing the low-income people of the Bronx who rely on the legal and social support services of The Bronx Defenders. Our staff of 400 helps over 20,000 Bronx residents each year and reaches hundreds more through community intake and engagement. Our work has been proven to reduce evictions, incarceration rates, lengths of sentences, deportations and time in foster care,” said **Justine Olderman, executive director of The Bronx Defenders**. “But we can't deliver high-quality holistic defense without full funding. The inability to provide our staff with competitive compensation coupled with the chronic underfunding of our work threatens our ability to serve those who need us most. The City must act now to ensure equal access to justice for all New Yorkers.”

“All New Yorkers deserve high-quality representation regardless of their ability to pay for an attorney,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “When the city budget underfunds and undervalues these critical services and Constitutionally-guaranteed rights, New Yorkers suffer. New York City must show that it values the work of public defenders fighting tirelessly to guarantee justice for their clients, by closing the pay parity gap and fully funding the staffing and operational needs of legal services organizations.”

“Defender organizations play a critical role in ensuring our city's justice system functions and the citizens of New York have equal access to high quality legal representation and crime-reducing community-based programs,” said **Hettie Powell, Managing Director of Queens Defenders**. “We encourage the City to demonstrate to its lowest-income citizens that it values their right to legal counsel as much as an over-funded police force and their own attorney staff.”

“Legal services providers deliver life-changing support to thousands of New Yorkers every year. The increasing costs of essential expenses that keep our programs running threaten not only the wellbeing of our staff, but also the lives of our clients,” said **Lisa Rivera, managing attorney and interim president and attorney-in-charge of New York Legal Assistance Group** . “Full compensation from the City for our staffing and operational needs is crucial to the delivery of justice and protecting New Yorkers who face the steepest barriers to resources and support.”

“Civil legal services programs are being hit just as hard as the defender community,” said **Raun Rasmussen, Executive Director of Legal Services NYC**. “Our staff provides life-changing legal services for low-income New Yorkers, helping them keep their homes and stay out of shelters, find safety from domestic violence, get fully paid for low-wage work, and obtain green cards or citizenship after fleeing violence in their home countries, among other things. While the City pays us to provide these critical services, it’s never enough to cover costs which increase year after year while City funding remains stagnant. Unfortunately, this means fewer staff members each year to deliver these essential legal services. We need City funding that fully covers our costs so New Yorkers in need can get the justice they deserve.”

“Defender organizations provide critical support for the most vulnerable among us,” said **Michele Cortese, Executive Director of the Center for Family Representation , which has represented over 12,000 parents at risk of losing their children to the foster system and youth at risk of incarceration in Manhattan and Queens**. “The chronic underfunding of our work not only impacts our staff, but also has a disproportionately negative impact on low-income families and communities of color. If the City is to live into its values of racial justice and supporting the most vulnerable New Yorkers, it must close the pay parity gap between City attorneys and public defenders, and ensure that all our organizations are sustainable.”

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