

Adriene Holder, Chief Attorney, Civil Practice

The Legal Aid Society

Remarks for the Chief Judge's Civil Legal Services Hearing

September 18, 2025

Good afternoon. I'm Adriene Holder, and I serve as Chief Attorney of the Civil Practice at The Legal Aid Society. I am also honored to serve as a member of the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice and as a board member of the New York Legal Services Coalition.

At the outset, I want to extend my deep thanks to Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson; Presiding Justices Dianne T. Renwick, Hector LaSalle, Elizabeth A. Garry, and Gerald J. Whalen; Chief Administrative Judge Joseph A. Zayas; and New York State Bar Association President Kathleen Sweet for the opportunity to address you today.

Investing in civil legal services is not only an investment in access to justice but also a long-term commitment to combating racism, poverty, and inequality. With the support of Judiciary Civil Legal Services funding, providers like The Legal Aid Society are able to deliver both direct legal representation to individuals in crisis and systemic advocacy that addresses root causes and removes barriers for entire communities. In this way, legal services not only help those who walk through our doors but also create lasting change so that many others will never need to seek legal help in the first place. On behalf of The Legal Aid Society and the broader New York State civil legal services community, I extend our sincere gratitude for your continued investment and support.

One of the examples of this dual impact is in the area of access to dental care. Adequate dental care is critical to overall health and well-being. Poor oral health is connected to cardiovascular disease, respiratory infection, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and chronic conditions such as diabetes. It can also have a profound impact on mental health and employability. Low-income New Yorkers, immigrants, and communities of color are far more likely to experience poor oral health.

New York's Medicaid program has long included a dental benefit, but until recently many of its clinical rules had not been updated since the 1960s. For decades, coverage excluded molar root canals and crowns, required people to lose half their teeth before becoming eligible for dentures, and denied replacement dentures more than once every eight years. Critically, dental implants were entirely excluded – even when medically necessary – forcing many people to go without teeth or incur crushing medical debt.

In 2018, The Legal Aid Society, through our Law Reform Unit and pro bono partners, brought litigation to change these outdated rules. After years of litigation through the COVID-19 pandemic, a

settlement was reached in 2023, and new rules went into effect in 2024. These reforms lifted the ban on dental implants, extended coverage to molar root canals, crowns, and replacement dentures, and impacted more than 5 million adults enrolled in Medicaid. The effect has been life-changing: our Health Law practice has already assisted more than 200 people in overturning Medicaid denials, restoring their ability to eat, work, and live free of pain.

At the same time, our work is now challenged by federal threats. H.R. 1, signed into law earlier this summer, makes the largest cuts to Medicaid in the program's history – an estimated \$1 trillion over ten years, with up to 1.5 million New Yorkers projected to lose coverage. Work requirements, shortened renewal cycles, and increased administrative burdens will create barriers to care, especially for vulnerable populations, including immigrants. The cuts will put enormous strain on the healthcare system, and civil legal services will become even more essential in helping people navigate these shifting and punitive rules.

These proposed cuts will also disproportionately harm communities already marginalized within the healthcare and legal systems. Immigrants will face new eligibility restrictions and procedural hurdles. Seniors living on fixed incomes will struggle to maintain coverage under burdensome re-enrollment requirements. Transgender and gender nonconforming New Yorkers – who already experience high barriers to care – will face renewed threats to the gender-affirming services they depend on. The Legal Aid Society has always risen to meet these challenges, as we did in *Cruz v. Zucker*, where we successfully fought for Medicaid coverage of gender-affirming health care. We will continue to respond as client needs evolve, but without adequate resources, the ability of our staff to provide both direct representation and systemic advocacy will be severely constrained.

Beyond the direct cuts, H.R. 1 also threatens to weaponize federal power in ways that could undermine the very legal and advocacy work essential to protecting vulnerable communities – and the work of our partner organizations that provide the holistic services our clients rely upon. This creates a chilling effect that risks silencing advocacy at the very moment when those communities need it most.

Despite these challenges, The Legal Aid Society and our partners remain committed to ensuring equal justice for all New Yorkers, but we cannot do it without stable and sustainable investment. As a board member of the New York Legal Services Coalition, I want to underscore a simple truth: the progress I've described today – whether in the courtroom on behalf of individual clients or in systemic reforms that benefit millions – depends on your continued commitment to funding civil legal services. That means holding the line on current funding levels, without reductions, and ensuring annual cost-of-living adjustments, and preserving flexibility so that providers can meet evolving needs, address pay parity, and sustain infrastructure.

Just as importantly, we must continue to move toward the long-term goal of \$200 million annually. This begins with an increase of at least \$25 million this year, paired with a COLA. Without this additional investment, programs and staff will be destabilized at precisely the moment when demand for services is increasing.

In short, we must keep our eyes on the prize: building a civil legal services system that is strong, equitable, and durable enough to weather federal cuts and meet the surging demand ahead. With your continued leadership, we can sustain the life-changing work already underway and ensure that the promise of justice is not reserved for the few but realized for all New Yorkers.

Again, on behalf of The Legal Aid Society, thank you for your continued support, and for the opportunity to speak with you.

Matthew Adinolfi

Client of The Legal Aid Society

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My name is Matthew Adinolfi. I live in Essex County, New York. In 2018, I read an article about a man in New York City who had a lot of medical problems that were made worse because he didn't have teeth and Medicaid wouldn't cover the kind of dental care he needed. He was part of a lawsuit that was trying to change the Medicaid rules. I saw that article and reached out to The Legal Aid Society to thank them for what they were doing because I had been struggling for a long time because of my inability to get the dental care I needed. I also wanted the lawyers to understand that not getting dental care has a serious impact on people's emotional and mental health.

Many years before, I had teeth pulled because Medicaid didn't cover root canals and I couldn't afford to pay out-of-pocket for them. That caused my surrounding teeth to come loose and have problems. Then in 2010, I got an infection that required me to have most of my remaining teeth pulled. I was given upper and lower dentures. But the dentures never fit me. They slipped out of my mouth, and I was not able to chew with them. A few years later, I paid out-of-pocket for a permanent bridge spanning my front lower teeth. The permanent bridge didn't include back teeth

because I couldn't afford it. For over 10 years, I didn't have the back teeth I needed to chew my food. I didn't wear my upper dentures because they rubbed against my gums and palette causing irritation, bleeding and pain. My dental problems also caused me social and emotional problems. Over the years, I became more and more isolated and depressed because of my lack of teeth. When I would go out to eat with people, I would make excuses and tell people that I already ate. When I would meet someone I was interested in romantically, I wouldn't pursue the relationship. The situation with my teeth always kept me in the dark. This was my situation for nearly 15 years.

I ended up joining the lawsuit. Legal Aid worked hard to get me the dental care I needed. When I couldn't find a dentist in my area, Legal Aid helped me search for a dentist. I ultimately found a provider who would work with me, but he didn't take Medicaid. Legal Aid worked for me to see that dentist, who also donated some of his services that he felt I needed that Medicaid wouldn't pay for. When the dentist needed to get paid upfront and Medicaid wouldn't do that, Legal Aid found a charitable donor who provided a loan, so I didn't have to take out a credit card or borrow money. Legal Aid worked out an agreement so the dentist could get paid upfront and I could get the work started as soon as possible. This became especially important because I had developed a serious infection that needed immediate treatment.

Legal Aid provides essential legal services and advocacy for New Yorkers. I've been told that so much of what Legal Aid does, would not be possible without the consistent investment of Judiciary Civil Legal Services funding since 2011.

Getting this dental care has changed my life. I now have a full set of teeth that I never had before. I'm a lot happier. My mouth is functioning. I can eat different kinds of food now. I am more social. And I have learned to smile again.