

NEW YORK, NY (June 23, 2023) – New York City’s leading public defender and civil legal services organizations called on Mayor Eric Adams to support increased funding in the City’s Fiscal Year 2024 budget to address insufficient funding levels, wage inequality, and rising costs which jeopardize low-income New Yorkers’ access to critical legal services.

In addition to funding, widespread contracting issues, including late contract registration, delayed payments, and lack of cost-of-living adjustments, have led to organizational instability.

These organizations support the City Council’s proposed \$195 million in increased funding this upcoming fiscal year as an initial step in the right direction to address the aforementioned long-standing issues.

Last week, 26 Council Members issued an [open letter](#) to Mayor Adams calling for this increase, which was also included in the City Council’s budget response issued this past April.

“The time to act is now. Low-income New Yorkers cannot afford to wait,” said **Raun Rasmussen, executive director of Legal Services NYC**. “Mayor Adams and the New York City Council must include additional funding for legal service providers in the FY2024 budget so that we can meet the needs of all struggling New Yorkers, not just some. Our vital services make the difference between having a home and being homeless, keeping families together, and allowing people to live healthy, stable lives. We are a city that purports to care about all New Yorkers and it’s time we live up to that promise.”

“Public defenders and civil legal services providers play an integral role in our legal system, and when they are chronically underfunded, as they have been for decades, low-income New Yorkers ultimately bear the consequences,” said **Twyla Carter, Attorney-in-Chief and CEO of The Legal Aid Society**. “It is paramount that Mayor Eric Adams and the City Council prioritize additional funding for our organizations in the FY2024 budget to ensure that all New Yorkers in need of comprehensive legal services receive the zealous representation that they need and rightfully deserve.”

“While costs in NYC have soared, our contracts have stayed flat for years. Attorneys and advocates who serve our community in crisis can no longer afford to do this important work,” said **Alice Fontier, Managing Director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**. “The City is out of step with reality and pays less than regions upstate and elsewhere in the country. We must have fair budgets now.”

“The City cannot allow thousands of New Yorkers to lose their homes, their families, or their freedom simply because they could not afford a lawyer or obtain other critical legal services. Yet without adequate funding for public defense, that is exactly what will happen next year,” said **Justine Olderman, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders**. “People’s lives and futures hang in the balance. The City must have their back and support fair funding for all NYC legal service providers.”

“New York City’s public defender offices are at a crossroads,” said **Stan German, Executive Director of New York County Director Services**. “The \$125 million needed to shore up our defender offices is essential to insure that poor and marginalized New Yorkers get the quality representation they deserve.”

“Until legal service providers are funded sufficiently to meet the demand for critical legal services by low income NYC residents and to pay our staff salaries that enable them to dedicate their legal careers to serving the public interest, the City’s commitment to equity and justice for all of its inhabitants rings hollow,” said **Jessica Rose, Executive Director of Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A**. “The City Council’s proposed increase in legal services funding for FY24 moves us towards this shared goal.”

“The City of New York must address the many systemic obstacles to its citizens’ right to legal counsel – including adequately funding the providers of free representation for those who cannot afford it,” said **Lori Zeno, Executive Director of Queens Defenders**. “Our attorneys, social workers, and support staff members find themselves at a crossroads between their dedication to our clients and being able to afford to live in the City they so diligently serve. Mayor Adams and the NYC Council have an opportunity to ensure all New Yorkers have access to high quality legal representation by providing fair funding to legal service providers in the FY2024 budget.”

“Legal services providers provide an incalculable benefit to New Yorkers experiencing poverty, to their futures, and to our city. Despite this, for decades our services have been underfunded and subject to dysfunctional contracting and payment processes, undermining the rights and livelihoods of New Yorkers most in need of justice,” said **Lisa Rivera, president and CEO of New York Legal Assistance Group**. “Mayor Eric Adams and the City Council must commit to additional funding for legal services in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget so that the rights of New Yorkers, all New Yorkers, are protected.”

“The mission of legal services organizations is to serve NYC’s poor, marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

We save lives, and we need the support to do so,” said **Tiffany Liston, Executive Director of Mobilization for Justice**. “The city can no longer sit on this issue. We are underfunded with contracts that do not pay in a timely fashion. It is imperative that we course correct now in the FY 2024 budget.”

“New Yorkers facing incarceration, family separation, eviction, deportation, and other serious harms in the legal system deserve zealous representation regardless of their ability to afford an attorney,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “As cases head to trial and people’s lives hang in the balance, it is crucial that our clients have experienced attorneys by their side to defend them. However, chronic underfunding contributes to widespread attrition that has put legal services organizations in crisis, and as a result, the people we represent suffer. Mayor Adams and the NYC Council must show that it values the rights and lives of people ensnared in the legal system by prioritizing increased funding for public defense and legal services in the FY 2024 budget.”

Background

Public defenders and civil legal services organizations represent hundreds of thousands of people facing criminal charges and incarceration in inhumane conditions, eviction, job loss, food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare and mental health services, family separation, and deportation. These organizations are the safety net for so many, but because they lack critical funding, they are faltering and are in crisis.

These organizations have shouldered years of chronic underfunding, contracting issues, and unfulfilled commitments, unable to both increase staff salaries and upgrade technology to meet the demands created by recently enacted legislative reforms, including the needed changes to New York’s discovery statute.

Government funders’ refusal and failure to meaningfully address this crisis has led to unprecedented and widespread staff resignations, ever ballooning workloads, long unfilled vacancies, pushing public defenders and civil legal services providers to a breaking point. Lastly, like the experiences of many other non-profits, the City’s contracting and payment process causes additional harm and is in need of comprehensive reform, an overhaul both Mayor Adams and Comptroller Brad Lander have acknowledged is needed.

Chronic and persistent delays in contract registration, major cash flow challenges threaten payroll and other critical purchasing needs.

If both these concerns are left unaddressed in the City’s Fiscal Year 2024 budget, staff attrition levels will only continue to rise, and low-income New Yorkers will be further marginalized and disconnected from the critical services needed to keep them in their homes, with their way families, and in their communities.