

## **Cori Mackey**

**March 18, 2016**

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee  
IN FAVOR OF SB 428  
Re Funding for Legal Aid**

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbas and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Cori Mackey, and I am the Executive Director of the Christian Activities Council in Hartford, CT.

The Christian Activities Council (CAC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting human equality and social justice in the metropolitan Hartford area. Our mission is to develop leaders who act collectively for social justice. Our programs span vital areas of human life—including housing, youth education and health care, and empowerment through community organizing.

**I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 428, *AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING OF LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE POOR.***

My team of community organizers and I became involved with the residents of a multifamily HUD subsidized apartment complex, in late July 2015 when all of the residents were displaced by a fire. Many of the residents—all very low-income families including families with children—lost everything they owned. Many also lost important legal documents and personal identification as they were forced to evacuate quickly. The residents initially encountered problems with the City of Hartford's relocation assistance program, and were told that they would get two weeks in a motel; after that they were expected to stay with friends or family, or call 211 to find space at a homeless shelter. With Greater Hartford Legal Aid's help, we successfully organized the residents. Residents were able to bring attention to problems in the City's relocation assistance program, and to get the real, day-to-day help all of these displaced families needed. GHLA was critically important because they taught residents about their legal rights and helped our

organizers understand the law and the benefits each resident was entitled to receive under the law.

We also became aware that Greater Hartford Legal Aid has a case in court which is trying to improve the City's relocation program overall. We helped GHLA fight that case—as members of the affected communities-- so that tenants can get the relocation help they need and are entitled to when their homes are lost due to fire or other code enforcement issues causing them to be vacated from their home.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid provides critical legal services to our poorest, most vulnerable residents. Providing adequate funding is simply the right and just thing to do, but it's also a smart financial investment.

The clients GHLA represent live at the margins and are easy targets for predatory actions. A number of their clients find themselves at the mercy of predatory landlords, unscrupulous employers, or violent spouses. The work of GHLA is often the difference between a family remaining housed, employed, and self-sufficient versus entering homelessness or joblessness, needing to rely more fully on the state's aid. Someone will pay for the resulting consequences of these landlords and employers' actions and by supporting GHLA, we're providing more opportunities for justice to be served and for their clients, our poorest residents, to have their rights preserved.

I am asking you today to please support increased legal aid funding because right to legal representation, particularly that provided by the competent, passionate, and dedicated staff of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, is a critical life line for so many of our low-income residents. We can't afford to lose these services.

Thank you.