March 19, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Request for Supplemental Emergency Appropriations for Legal Services Corporation to Address Consequences of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Dear Chairman Shelby, Chairwoman Lowey, Vice Chairman Leahy, and Ranking Member Granger:

On behalf of the American Bar Association (ABA), the largest voluntary association of lawyers and legal professionals in the world, I urge you to act quickly to pass supplemental emergency appropriations for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) to help address the increasing legal needs of low-income Americans caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that is now spreading throughout our nation. LSC estimates that need will cost over $100 million to address, and the ABA fully supports its request for emergency funding now.

The Legal Services Corporation funds 132 legal aid programs in every state and territory that serve constituents in every congressional district. LSC grantees provide essential legal services that directly benefit more than 1.8 million low-income Americans. Specifically, legal aid grantees give advice on family law, housing, consumer, employment, and other civil legal issues in both federal and state cases.

As noted in my March 13 testimony to the Senate and House Appropriations Subcommittees on Commerce, Justice, and Science, the ABA greatly appreciates your Committees’ appropriation of $440 million for LSC funding in FY 2020 which helps meet some of the civil legal needs of low-income Americans in ordinary times. As you are aware, however, the country now faces an emergency caused by a public health crisis. Immediate supplemental funding is critically needed so LSC-funded legal providers can help the many thousands of your constituents who are facing unexpected employment, housing, domestic violence, and healthcare-related crises arising from or made worse by the coronavirus.
Unfortunately, we expect the growing COVID-19 pandemic to adversely affect the majority of clients that LSC grantees already serve and probably increase the population of those eligible to receive help, resulting in a dramatic spike in the need for legal services for our nation’s low-income population. The economic harms that will be felt immediately include sharply increased unemployment and evictions, loss of access to health care, and scams aimed at the elderly—all of which will require legal services to address. Quickly deteriorating conditions are expected to also lead to a greater need for temporary restraining orders to protect those threatened with increased domestic violence, to help tenants resist wrongful or premature evictions, and to prevent many other immediate and irreparable harms.

Although we recognize there are competing demands for urgent resources from Congress to be included in the next stimulus package, LSC needs additional emergency appropriations now to help address critical legal challenges confronting many of your constituents, including veterans, older Americans, disabled individuals, rural Americans, domestic violence survivors, women (constituting 71.6% of clients in 2018), and many others. The ABA urges you to support LSC’s supplemental funding request, thereby helping more low-income Americans get access to the legal help they may desperately need.

Thank you again for your continued support for adequate LSC funding on behalf of your constituents. Should you have any questions or need more information, please contact ABA Governmental Affairs Director Holly Cook at 202-662-1860 or holly.cook@americanbar.org.

Sincerely,

Judy Perry Martinez
President, American Bar Association

cc: Members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees
The Honorable Susan Brooks, Co-Chair, House Access to Legal Aid Caucus
The Honorable Debbie Dingell, Co-Chair, House Access to Legal Aid Caucus
The Honorable Joe Kennedy, Co-Chair, House Access to Legal Aid Caucus
The Honorable Fred Upton, Co-Chair, House Access to Legal Aid Caucus