



Marjorie Cook Foundation  
Domestic Violence Legal Clinic

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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 514**

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The House of Ruth is a non-profit organization providing shelter, counseling, and legal services to victims of domestic violence throughout the State of Maryland. House Bill 514 increases the distribution from the State's abandoned property fund to Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC), the organization that makes grants for the provision of legal services to low-income Marylanders. **We strongly urge the House Appropriations Committee to favorably report on House Bill 514.**

The House of Ruth Domestic Violence Legal Clinic ("Legal Clinic") receives a large part of its funding from MLSC. With this support, the Legal Clinic serves low-income victims of domestic violence throughout the state. House of Ruth attorneys provide representation in protective order hearings and divorce and custody cases; legal advocates provide information, lethality assessment, safety planning, and referrals to victims who call or visit our walk-in clinics at court houses in Baltimore City and Baltimore, Prince George's and Montgomery Counties. A 2016 study demonstrated that domestic violence victims who received civil legal representation experienced a notable reduction in physical violence over a 24-month period following the representation, as well as an increase in their psychological well-being and economic self-sufficiency.<sup>1</sup> Not only does civil legal representation work to prevent future domestic violence, but it also helps to mitigate the damage inflicted by that violence. Victims who were represented by legal services attorneys trained in domestic violence more frequently received custody and visitation orders that protected themselves and their children, as compared to cases in which victims were represented by private attorneys or victims who represented themselves.<sup>2</sup> Civil legal services are a vital part of Maryland's safety net for men, women and children escaping domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Hartley, C. C., & Renner, L. M. (2016). *The Longer-Term Influence of Civil Legal Services on Battered Women*. National Institutes of Justice, U.S. Dept. of Justice. Available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249879.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Kernic, M. (2015). *Final Report of the "Impact of Legal Representation on Child Custody Decisions among Families with a History of Intimate Partner Violence Study"*. U.S. Dept. of Justice, National Institute of Justice. Available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248886.pdf>.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, MLSC has experienced severe reductions in two of its major sources of funding. Historically, MLSC has relied in large part on the Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) as a source of its funding. During the last 11 months, the interest rates have been close to zero, resulting in little to no income for MLSC. In addition, MLSC relies on funds it receives from certain court filing fee surcharges. During the past 11 months, very few new courts cases were filed due to the court's pandemic-related limited operations. The third, and only stable source of MLSC funding, comes from the State's Abandoned Property Fund (the Fund). An increase in MLSC's allotment from the Fund will avert further reductions to MLSC's funds and allow MLSC and the legal services agencies it supports to continue to provide vitally needed services.

In 1984, the General Assembly authorized a \$500,000 annual distribution from the Abandoned Property fund to help MLSC support its many grantees, which, at the time, represented 17% of the total abandoned property fund. MLSC currently receives \$2 million from the Fund. MLSC seeks an increase in the abandoned property fund distribution to \$8 million. This seemingly large increase would still represent less than 7% of the Fund. With IOLTA revenue remaining close to zero and the continued reduction in new court filings, an increase in the abandoned property fund distribution would stabilize MLSC's funding and prevent massive funding cuts to its grantees.

MLSC enables the House of Ruth to help many victims of domestic abuse. During FY 2020, the Legal Clinic used MLSC and other funding to serve 3,229 victims. Without this support, low-income victims often would have no access to the legal services needed to help end the cycle of violence. As its only funding source with a guaranteed amount every year, increasing the abandoned property fund distribution will allow MLSC to continue to provide support for these important services.

**The House of Ruth strongly urges the House Appropriations Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 514.**