

WALK TO THE HILL
to support the
Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation

Remarks by,
Ralph D. Gants
Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court

11:30 A.M., January 26, 2017
State House
Boston, Massachusetts

In a few minutes, you will be speaking with legislators and legislative aides asking that they increase funding for MLAC by \$5 million from Fiscal Year 2017. They might ask you, why should MLAC receive an increase of that size when most state agencies will get just one percent? It is a fair question. The fair answer is that we can expect the coming year to present unprecedented challenges to the rule of law and to the health and well-being of the poor and the vulnerable in this Commonwealth. Our Legislature gets this.

At his inaugural address earlier this month, Speaker of the House DeLeo spoke these words:

"Following the presidential election, . . . I stood on the State House steps with many. I want to renew that commitment. As patriots and as public servants, we will stand as members of the House in solidarity. We will continue to work to support and protect each and every Massachusetts citizen. Today, we collectively affirm ourselves to all the ideals we hold dear."

At his inaugural address, Senate President Rosenberg said, "Through our commitment to shared leadership and shared responsibility, our state has its best chance to enjoy shared prosperity and true equality from one end of the Commonwealth to the other."

We are fortunate to have leaders in our Legislature who understand the challenges we will face, who are committed to protecting the rights of every Massachusetts resident, and who stand for the principle of "shared prosperity and true equality." Legal services stand at the forefront of that fight. And they badly need reinforcements because they are being overwhelmed by the growing need for help.

Legal aid organizations are being deluged with requests for help from immigrants who seek to become naturalized citizens, who fear the loss of their work permits, their housing, and their access to education. The poor and the elderly who survive on food stamps, Social Security, or transitional aid for dependent children will reach out to legal services when their benefits are terminated or reduced. The working poor and elderly whose health care may be put at risk by the repeal or erosion of the Affordable Care Act will look to legal services to protect their access to health benefits. Elder abuse, the loss of unemployment benefits, consumer fraud, eviction, domestic violence -- so many problems, and for each the poor look to legal services for help.

There are so many legislators who want to fight to safeguard the rights of the poor, to respect our immigrants, and to protect equal rights under the law. Tell them that the fight will cost just \$23 million -- which is roughly what the Red Sox are paying Hanley Ramirez this year - - which means we can defend the rights of the poor for what the Red Sox spend on a first baseman.