Greetings:

Enclosed is a report disclosing how the Access to Justice Act (AJA) filing fees have been used over the eight years those fees have been collected and allocated for the civil legal representation of indigent Pennsylvania residents (household income of $28,813 for a family of four). The AJA fees were initiated in 2002, and supplemented by an additional surcharge in 2009. The 2009 surcharge does not apply to traffic citations, but otherwise is collected on the same base of filings as the 2002 fee.

Over the eight years covered by the report, $67 million in AJA grants have been awarded to legal aid programs, 118,000 cases have been handled, and 232,000 people helped in cases typically involving domestic violence, child custody, and the loss of housing and government benefits, such as health care. Case vignettes in the report shed light on the human impact of those cases. Not only is access to our civil justice system a vital function of government and a cornerstone of a democracy, there is also an economic impact in providing legal aid. The AJA report discloses that impact as it relates specifically to the cases handled with the AJA funding. But to fully appreciate the impact of total funding for legal aid, also enclosed is a one page summary that discloses for each $1 spent on legal aid, $11 of quantifiable economic outcomes and savings are realized, and in excess of 2,600 jobs are supported, for all residents of the Commonwealth. Funding of legal aid is an essential element of our Commonwealth’s commitment to justice, and it makes economic sense.

In May 2011, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee conducted a performance audit to develop findings and recommendations regarding the continuing justification for the activities and financial support provided by the AJA. The auditors recommended the General Assembly consider making the AJA fee and surcharge permanent. Absent legislative action, the 2002 AJA fee is scheduled to sunset November 1, 2012. With the leadership of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the IOLTA Board and the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN) are working to achieve the elimination or extension of the sunset date. The auditors also recommended that a survey be conducted of legal aid clients to determine whether legal advice and brief services provided by telephone is an effective way of providing those services. The IOLTA Board has commissioned a survey to make that determination, and a report is expected on the results shortly.

We believe you will find the enclosed report compelling, and we seek your help in achieving the continuation of this vital source of funding for the civil legal assistance of indigent Pennsylvanians.

Sincerely,

Penina Kessler Lieber, Esquire

Chairperson