

BRIEFING ROOM

## FACT SHEET: President Biden to Sign Presidential Memorandum to Expand Access to Legal Representation and the Courts

MAY 18, 2021 • STATEMENTS AND RELEASES

Today, President Biden will sign a Presidential Memorandum to expand access to legal representation and the courts. As President Biden knows from his experience as a public defender, timely and affordable access to the legal system can make all the difference in a person's life—including by keeping an individual out of poverty, keeping an individual in his or her home, helping an unaccompanied child seek asylum, helping someone fight a consumer scam, or ensuring that an individual charged with a crime can mount a strong defense and receive a fair trial. But low-income people have long struggled to secure quality access to the legal system. Those challenges have only increased during the public health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, civil legal aid providers and public defenders have been under-resourced, understaffed, and unable to reach some of the people in greatest need of their services.

The federal government has a critical role to play in expanding access to the nation's legal system and supporting the work of civil legal aid providers and public defenders. President Biden's executive action today will reinvigorate the federal government's role in advancing access to justice, and help ensure that the Administration's policies and recovery efforts can reach as many individuals as possible.

The Presidential Memorandum is the Biden-Harris Administration's latest action to protect vulnerable Americans, reform the justice system, and advance racial equity. On his first day in office, the President issued an executive order establishing a government-wide initiative to put equity at the heart of each agency's priorities and management agenda. His discretionary budget request called for \$1.5 billion in funding for grants to strengthen state and local criminal justice systems, including by investing in public defenders. Improving access to counsel in civil and criminal proceedings builds on each of these efforts.

Specifically, President Biden is directing the following actions:

**AILA Doc. No. 21051833. (Posted 5/18/21)**

**The Attorney General will, within 120 days, submit a plan to expand the Department of Justice's access to justice work.** During the prior administration, the Department of Justice's access to justice work, formally launched as an initiative in 2010, was effectively shuttered. To restore the Department of Justice's leadership in this area, President Biden is directing Attorney General Garland to submit a report to the President within 120 days that outlines the Department's plan to expand its access to justice work. As Attorney General Garland will make clear in a memorandum that he will issue today, the Justice Department will start this work immediately.

**The Biden-Harris Administration will re-establish the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable to prioritize civil legal aid and expand access to federal programs.** The Biden-Harris Administration is re-committing to the mission of the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, which was initially established in 2015 to raise federal agencies' awareness of how civil legal aid could increase employment, family stability, housing security, consumer protection, and public safety. The White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable will be co-chaired by the Attorney General and the Counsel to the President, or their designees, and will convene federal agencies to identify ways to address some of the most pressing legal services challenges that we face today—including those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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