



# Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

## The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

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District of Columbia Council  
Committee on the Judiciary  
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My name is Stacey Eunnae and I am a Senior Staff Attorney at Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (AJE) and also a D.C. resident. AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the District of Columbia. Parents and adult students contact us for advice, guidance and support in understanding and protecting their rights to ensure children have access to an appropriate education. At AJE, we are a small but mighty core staff of six people. Each year, we respond to nearly 800 calls from families in the District, giving them critical information, resources and direct assistance to support their children, D.C. students. In the four cumulative years I have worked at AJE, I have directly assisted hundreds of D.C. families advocating for their children's education by providing services ranging from advice to direct representation in suspension, expulsion and special education hearings. Without the Access to Justice Initiative funding, it would not be possible to serve as many of the D.C. families as we have; however, we need additional support to continue this important work and address the compounding inequities that exist in our public school system.

Legal services are a backbone of this community and has led the charge responsibly for the advancement and growth of so many individual residents and community-based support systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed for many of us our dependence on certain agencies and institutions functioning to access critical support.

When all residents have access to justice through legal services, we can identify and address dysfunction in a system and gaps in services. For example, in March AJE provided critical assistance to a limited English proficient mother and primary caregiver of a non-verbal, autistic adult child with cognitive disabilities after we learned they were essentially trapped in their home without access to food or necessary supplies. Although this mother qualified to receive free meals DCPS was distributing at different sites around the city and potentially other disability services, she had no way to travel safely and access those meals and she was unable to get assistance on her own despite calling the relevant government agencies.



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On March 30<sup>th</sup>, two weeks into “stay-home” conditions, I received written confirmation from DCPS that there was not yet a delivery option, and therefore no current plan to get meals to D.C.’s home-bound students. With the help of a Georgetown Law student volunteer, we assisted this parent by connecting her to volunteer-led community resources to ensure she got groceries delivered to her house by the end of the week. Access to civil justice in a community means that no one is left behind or unheard, and therefore we serve as both a check and a balance to ensure that the government is working for everyone both in the short-term and the long-term.

This upcoming 2020-2021 school year is unprecedented and many students and parents do not know what to expect. The rules and scenarios of how things may play out in D.C.’s schools are rapidly changing. During this stay-home phase in the District, AJE has been busy creating new online trainings and virtual resources for parents and students. I anticipate that increasing access to our direct educational services and parent trainings will be more important than ever for D.C.’s families searching for reliable information and support as we enter new phases of social distancing guidelines and economic recovery. Without question, the ATJ Initiative funds enable AJE and AJE’s staff to continue our mission to empower parents and advance the educational outcomes of all D.C.’s students. My hope is that the Committee and Mayor Bowser will view investments in AJE and in all the District’s legal services as an investment in the community itself and a progressive future for all. In summary, we ask you to fully fund the Access to Justice Initiative to demonstrate your commitment to equity and civil justice for all.