Date: April 1, 2010

To: President Thomas V. Mike Miller, Jr.

Senator Ulysses Currie, Chair, and Members of the Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

Speaker Michael E. Busch

Delegate Norman E. Conway, Chair, and Members of the House Appropriations Committee

From: Undersigned Maryland Legal Services Providers

Re: OPPOSE FUNDING CUTS AND CONDITIONS ON UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND SCHOOL OF LAW LEGAL CLINICAL PROGRAMS

We, the undersigned Maryland legal services providers, write to support the continued academic independence and critical legal services provided by the University of Maryland School of Law’s legal clinical programs. Law school based clinical programs not only provide valuable training to the next generation of lawyers, they provide otherwise unavailable legal representation to indigent clients and those who cannot afford to enforce their rights under Maryland and federal law.

Budget language that denies or conditions funding upon the release of client information is intended to chill the representation of certain clients or those who would enforce laws against particular economic interests. When we begin to decide which rights our citizens may enforce based upon the identity of the plaintiff or defendant, we are in danger of politicizing our legal system. In a state dedicated to equal rights under the law, the General Assembly should not be sending a message to its citizens that some interests have the power to thwart others from using the legal system. This tactic of imposing intrusive and perhaps unethical disclosure requirements on lawyers would have a tremendous chilling effect on the entire legal services community throughout Maryland – a community that works hard every day to provide access to justice for all and ensure that equality of opportunity is more than mere phraseology.

Our interest does not lie in the merits of any particular case, although we believe that justice demands all parties to a dispute have access to vigorous advocacy. Providers of legal services supply representation for the disenfranchised and sometimes unpopular individuals and causes to ensure our courts are accessible to all and that our system of justice is balanced. These critical legal services are already in woefully short supply. We need the Law School’s legal clinical programs to help fill the justice gap.
The University of Maryland School of Law's legal clinical programs must retain their independent advocacy as a provider of desperately needed legal services and a quality legal educational experience. The General Assembly already has access to sufficient relevant information about the clinical programs. Conditioning continued funding on disclosures that are intended to discourage, not further, the educational and legal objectives of the program is overreaching, and must be rejected.

Respectfully,

John Nethercutt  
Executive Director  
Public Justice Center

Virginia Knowlton  
Executive Director  
Maryland Disability Law Center

Wilhelm Joseph  
Executive Director  
Maryland Legal Aid Bureau

Antonia K. Fasanelli  
Executive Director  
Homeless Persons Representation Project

Bonnie A. Sullivan  
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Kristine Dunkerton  
Executive Director  
Community Law Center