

Legislation Text

File #: 210165, **Version:** 0

Honoring and commending Jennifer R. Clarke for her 15-year tenure as the Executive Director of the Public Interest Law Center and her strategic, pioneering, and transformative work to expand access to justice that has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people across Pennsylvania and the nation.

WHEREAS, Throughout her career as a courageous, kind, and steadfast leader in the legal and public interest communities, Jennifer R. Clarke has been motivated by a deep commitment to creatively using the law to remedy systemic inequality and to improve the lives of her fellow citizens; and

WHEREAS, Clarke graduated from Columbia Law School in 1982 and entered private practice, first as an associate with White & Case and then at Dechert, Price and Rhodes, where she became a partner in 1991. While a partner at Dechert, Clarke served as a Trustee of the Women's Law Project, a not-for-profit law firm, and handled major pro bono matters, including a class action lawsuit in partnership with the Public Interest Law Center to secure delivery of medical and dental care to Medicaid-enrolled children in the State of Michigan; and

WHEREAS, In 2006, Clarke resigned from her partnership at Dechert and became the Executive Director of the Public Interest Law Center, a not-for-profit public interest law firm that uses high-impact legal strategies to advance the civil, social, and economic rights of communities in the Philadelphia region facing discrimination, inequality, and poverty. As Executive Director, Clarke was responsible for leading all aspects of the organization including strategic direction, legal quality, finances, administration and personnel; and

WHEREAS, After becoming the first woman Executive Director at the Law Center, Clarke pursued claims on behalf of children in Florida to enforce children's health care provisions of the Medicaid Act. There, the Law Center and co-counsel Boies, Schiller and Flexner LLP led the effort to secure compliance with federal laws and regulations requiring the state to provide medical and dental care to approximately 1.6 million children enrolled in Medical Assistance in Florida; and

WHEREAS, Under Clarke's leadership, the Law Center relaunched its housing practice to empower low-income tenants through organizing and affirmative litigation. In 2017 the Law Center filed a successful class action lawsuit seeking to give meaning to the legal protections Philadelphia enacted to protect vulnerable renters from unsafe housing, serving as a catalyst for changes in eviction court procedures that now require landlords to demonstrate compliance with the law before seeking to collect rent or evict; and

WHEREAS, In 2014 the Law Center, working with the Education Law Center and O'Melveny & Myers LLP, filed a historic lawsuit representing a group of plaintiffs challenging a school funding system that fails to provide enough resources for students in low-wealth districts across the Commonwealth. The case, which is set for trial in Commonwealth Court later this year, has already resulted in a landmark ruling overturning a generation of case law that had closed the courtroom doors to those seeking redress for systemic underfunding of schools; and

WHEREAS, Under Clarke's leadership, the Law Center has led the way in the most important voting rights

cases in Pennsylvania in the last decade. Significant victories for Pennsylvania voters include *Applewhite v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, in which the Law Center, in conjunction with the ACLU of Pennsylvania, the Advancement Project, and Arnold & Porter LLP, worked tirelessly to successfully challenge Pennsylvania's photo ID law, at the time the strictest in the country, which could have disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of citizens, including seniors, veterans, the disabled, and students. In 2017, the Law Center and Arnold & Porter LLP successfully represented 18 voters from each congressional district in a challenge to Pennsylvania's 2011 congressional map-one of the most egregious examples of partisan gerrymandering in the nation, resulting in a new, fair map for Pennsylvania voters. Last year, the Law Center joined a broad coalition of civil rights organizations to represent voters fighting back against attempts to nullify their vote and restrict their access to the ballot box in a series of cases before and following the General Election; and

WHEREAS, Recently, under Clarke's leadership, the Law Center is collaborating with the Philadelphia Department of Public Health to take on the public health epidemic of gun violence, developing new legal theories and strategies for regulating firearms under Pennsylvania's current gun laws, which have blocked virtually all attempts at local gun control. The Law Center has intervened on behalf of two mothers who lost their sons to handgun violence in a case involving the enforcement of the City's lost and stolen gun ordinance, and has filed a major lawsuit, against the Commonwealth challenging the constitutionality of the state's firearm preemption laws. Of the twelve plaintiffs in this lawsuit, nine are mothers and grandmothers who have lost their sons to gun violence on the streets of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In addition to litigation, Clarke has been the driving force behind the creation of the PA Safety Alliance, an unprecedented coalition of teachers, doctors, faith leaders and others, who are committed to making gun violence prevention a priority in Harrisburg; and

WHEREAS, Clarke's leadership and generosity has dramatically expanded the power and impact of the public interest legal community. Clarke helped found Take Action Philly, an initiative started in 2017 to address the major legal and social crises of our times through a public interest lens. The initiative convenes civic leaders and the legal community to hold educational events in response to new threats to Philadelphians and provide attendees with concrete ways to take action together on issues ranging from immigration, climate change, threats to voting rights, unlawful restrictions on public benefits, and more; and

WHEREAS, Clarke has also worked to ensure the diversity of the Law Center and to enhance the participation of women in the Law Center's leadership. Prior to her tenure, the Board and staff were largely comprised of male lawyers. Today, women comprise approximately half of the staff members and board. In addition, during Clarke's tenure, the Law Center's board began intentionally recruiting members from outside of Philadelphia's legal community, including former clients and other local leaders and advocates; and

WHEREAS, In her years of leadership, Clarke transformed the finances of the Law Center, ensuring sustainable growth to position the organization to take on more cases and staff members to better serve its clients and their communities; and

WHEREAS, Clarke's positive impact on civic institutions extends well beyond the legal community in Philadelphia. When the original Caring Center, an exemplary non-profit early childhood education provider that served a culturally, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse population, lost its home and their long established child care program was in jeopardy, Clarke was part of a small group of determined parents who formed a non-profit corporation to carry on what had become a tradition of excellent child care, something which is critical for women's advancement in the workplace; and

WHEREAS, On Election Days, Clarke can be found in the 8th Ward, 24th Division, where she stepped up and ran for local office following the 2016 Presidential election. Clarke now serves as a Majority Inspector and a

role model for local civic engagement in the democratic process; and

WHEREAS, In addition to her creation of the Law Center's Garden Justice Legal Initiative, Clarke contributes to the greening of our city personally as part of the Spring Gardens, an urban community garden just north of Center City in Fairmount. Clarke has been an active and longstanding member of this cherished community garden where neighborhood families come together to grow food and flowers, raise honey bees, and voluntarily maintain an entire block of open green space; and

WHEREAS, Throughout her career, Clarke has stood as an example of engaged citizenship, trailblazing leadership, and commitment to the principles of equality. Her leadership of the Law Center has led to long-lasting victories for renters seeking safe housing, voters seeking a free and equal voice, families seeking quality healthcare for their children, and so many others. The City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are fortunate to have her as a champion; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Honors and commends Jennifer R. Clarke for her 15-year tenure as the Executive Director of the Public Interest Law Center and her strategic, pioneering, and transformative work to expand access to justice that has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people across Pennsylvania and the nation.