



January 26, 2016

## **Melissa L. Williams**

It is with great sadness that I announce the passing of Attorney Melissa L. Williams. Melissa served on my Advisory Committee as the Criminal Justice Chair for the Eighth District. Melissa Williams was a fighter for what she called the CommUnity. She was passionate about educating members of the community about their legal rights on matters such as housing, criminal, and family law. Melissa provided Chicagoland residents with the opportunity to learn their legal resources in their own neighborhood, and was skilled at bringing together Illinois' public officials with community residents and organizations to discuss ideas and recommendations for criminal justice reform on the topics of re-entry and recidivism, juvenile justice, sentencing, and community-police relations.

In 2012-2013, Williams was a chief organizer and advocate bringing together more than 80 community groups that signed on as proponents and 35 legislators who joined me as the bill's Chief Sponsor to support HB 3061 (formerly HB 5723), the Illinois Sealing Bill, to seal certain criminal records for non-violent offenses to increase opportunities for rehabilitated citizens to contribute to society. Her persistence, dedication and organizing abilities led to the passage of the legislation and signature into law by the governor in August 2013, helping thousands of ex-offenders, and as CEO of the Wiley Resource Center, she personally helped many ex-offenders to seal their records and expand their opportunities in employment and housing.

In 2003, Williams received her Juris Doctorate at John Marshall Law School in Chicago. She graduated at the top 25%, of her class and was admitted to Illinois Bar in November 2003. She also received a BA in Political Science with a Minor in African American Studies at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. She received honors for "Outstanding New Staff" in Student Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago, featured for her pro bono efforts as an attorney in the Journal American Bar Association and highlighted in Who's Who in Black Chicago.

From July 2004 to June 2005 she served as a staff attorney for Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, Inc. in Chicago. As a Staff Attorney in the Tenants' Advocacy Project, she coordinated intervention programs for Chicago area tenants in disputes with their landlords. While here, she would review intake interviews as completed with tenants, investigate landlord's violations of law and attempt to negotiate settlements between parties. She courageously defended tenants in eviction court by initiating lawsuits on their behalf, conducted research and discovery, and prepared pleadings as necessary. Williams would

also participate in community training programs on housing issues throughout the Chicago area as a guest speaker.

From June 2008 to June 2009 she worked at the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights in Chicago as the Cabrini Works Program Associate Director. While as Associate Director she provided administrative leadership for start-up contract programs that offered case management, employment, and clinical counseling services to Cabrini Green Residents to assist them in the public housing relocation process. She managed a caseload of over 1000 families and monitored processes to ensure that consent decree between Cabrini Residents and Chicago Housing Authority were not violated in the resident relocation process.

From April 2010 to January 2011, Williams served as Executive Assistant to Bureau Chief/Director where she performed specialized tasks as designated by Bureau Chief. While at the Cook County Bureau of Community Development she served as Director of Legal Affairs, Human Resources, and Compliance Divisions for the Bureau and Interim Program Manager for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Neighborhood Stabilization Program ("NSP") administered by Cook County.

She also worked at UIC's Student Legal Services where she was the sole attorney responsible for developing the strategic direction and goals for the Student Legal Service office. The office assisted 28,000 + students from the University of Illinois campuses in Chicago, Rockford, and Peoria. She developed comprehensive programs and services to address the legal needs of UIC students where she advised, counseled and guided students in regard to their legal concerns and rights within various areas of the law. She effectively organized educational workshops and presentations for students and supervised paralegal and law clerk staff. Williams directed the daily office operations where she consults and collaborates with internal and external constituencies.

Ms. Williams' drive, dedication, and passion for helping others will truly be missed, and may she rest in peace.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', written in a cursive style.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District