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**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services
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**Performance Oversight Hearing
Department of Human Services**

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Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center¹ (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we represent more than 1,200 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs. Many of these children are living in homes that are currently receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) through the Department of Human Services (DHS).

I appreciate this opportunity to testify and will focus my testimony primarily on the TANF program. Changes to ensure that DC's TANF program overcomes its past failings and truly becomes the "welfare to work" program that helps families will require significant investments of time, attention and resources. Last year, the Council made attempts to create a system that will increase work participation and give training and resources to families when they need them. DHS has begun a redesign of the program, but problems still remain that will put families and children in jeopardy. We appreciate that you, Chairman Graham, and Councilmember Michael Brown recognize this and just last week introduced legislation, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Time Limit Amendment Act of 2012 (B19-0704), which seeks to prevent thousands of families from seeing drastic cuts in benefits this spring. The bill would also add important exceptions, such as disability or domestic violence, to TANF time limits to our current law. Many of these exceptions are already acknowledged by other states as situations warranting exemption from TANF limitations.

The District is working to reform and redesign its TANF program. However, the success of the redesign is at risk because of a mismatch between DC's recently adopted time limit policy — which will reduce benefits to as low as \$260 a month for thousands of families this year — and the

implementation of the new TANF employment program, because many families will have their benefits cut before they can even access the new TANF services. Additional supports to families, in the form of more employment and training options, individualized assessments and a “universal engagement approach,” are coming; but it is unclear if the structure is in place to accommodate all of the families who will require these services.² Without the meaningful prospect of employment, significant cuts to these families will undermine any progress they might be making. Until the capacity exists to follow through on this proposed redesign, reforms amount to benefits reductions and time limit for support, which do not assist families in moving toward sustainability, but simply throw them back into instability.

TANF is a life sustaining bridge for many families. As you know, TANF is available only to families and is therefore a targeted measure with the unique ability to help the 31% of children in the District living in poverty.³ While all families on TANF have children, by definition, 46% of TANF families in DC have at least one child under the age of three – a critical stage in a child’s development.⁴ During the first three years of life, an important foundation is created for a lifetime of health and ability. What each child experiences during this period of rapid physical and mental growth --- both positive and negative --- will influence how and what he or she learns.⁵ A wealth of research shows that stress and trauma during this time can have lifelong negative consequences.⁶

Cutting a family’s welfare benefits impacts more than their already low income. When a family’s benefits are lowered, or if a family is terminated from the program altogether without a likelihood of obtaining gainful employment, they are at risk to experience significant material hardships. These hardships include trouble paying for housing or utilities, health problems and hunger.⁷ Young children have a significantly increased rate of hospitalizations and increased rates of food insecurity in these situations.⁸ Children also do worse in several developmental areas and have lower scores on tests of quantitative and readings skills.⁹

More alarming, is the link between the reduction in welfare benefits and an increase in child maltreatment as measured by contact with child protective services, substantiated cases of physical abuse and neglect and by numbers of children in foster care.¹⁰ Every year in DC, many children enter foster care simply because their parents do not have adequate housing.¹¹ If thousands of families are terminated from TANF and unable to pay their rent, it seems likely many of these families would be reported to CFSA for neglect and without any means to assist these families with housing, many of these children may enter the child welfare system.

Cutting TANF benefits before fully implementing reforms and additional services will not improve employment outcomes or promote self-sufficiency among beneficiaries. In fact, it will be harder for families to work or prepare for work if they have less money for clothes, transportation, housing and child care. It will also likely increase reliance on other District systems of support that could be more costly in the long run. However, with meaningful expansion of services, on a realistic timeframe, TANF can become a robust program that moves families out of poverty. We look forward to working with DHS to achieve these goals.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

¹ Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 80-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city’s laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit www.childrenslawcenter.org.

² DCFPI <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2-23-12-TANF-Reform.pdf> and The Department of Human Services Important Information for TANF Recipients http://dhs.dc.gov/dhs/frames.asp?doc=/dhs/lib/dhs/pdfs/tanf/tanf_faqs_foremployees_and_recipients_v19.pdf.

³ “District of Columbia’s Infants, Toddlers, & Families: Strong Families,” Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families; <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/state-community-policy/baby-facts/district-of-columbia-baby-facts-with-citations.pdf> Citing to: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, “Table 34: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – Active

Cases, Percent Distribution of TANF Youngest Child Recipient by Age Group.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, www.acf.hhs.gov.

⁴“District of Columbia’s Infants, Toddlers, & Families: Strong Families,” Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families; <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/state-community-policy/baby-facts/district-of-columbia-baby-facts-with-citations.pdf> Citing to: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, “Table 34: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – Active Cases, Percent Distribution of TANF Youngest Child Recipient by Age Group.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, www.acf.hhs.gov.

⁵ See <http://main.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/PartC.pdf?docID=567&AddInterest=1161>

⁶ In Brief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development; Harvard University Center on the Developing Child; http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_the_impact_of_early_adversity/

⁷ West Coast Poverty Center, Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet, (2006).

⁸Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, *The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers*, 4 (July 2002). Infants and toddlers (up to the 3 years) in families who benefits had been terminated or reduced had a 30% higher risk of having been hospitalized, a 90% higher risk of being admitted to the hospital when visiting an emergency room and a 50% higher risk of being food insecure than children in families whose benefits had not been decreased.

⁹West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, 36 (2006).

¹⁰ The largest and most comprehensive study, which reviews data from all states from 1990-1998: Christina Paxson & Jane Waldfogel, *Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment*, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003). Two other studies (of Michigan and Illinois) found a link between family sanctions and increased contact with child protective services or the increased odds of having a child maltreatment allegation. Although one study (Milwaukee) found no link between family sanctions and child welfare involvement. West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, 37 (2006).

¹¹ Government of the District of Columbia, Child and Family Services Agency, Implementing the Adoption and Safe Families Amendment Act of 2000 in the District of Columbia (2009 Annual Report), 31.