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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
May 8, 2015

Public Hearing:
Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Oversight Hearing

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Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Damon King and I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With nearly 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono attorneys across the District, CLC reaches 1 out of every 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – that's more than 5,000 children and families each year.

In a difficult budget season, the Mayor has focused on our most vulnerable families – proposing investments in homeless services and affordable housing while maintaining stable funding for social safety net agencies. We urge the Council to preserve proposed funding levels for these agencies and, further, if it finds savings in the budget, invest them in populations in which we have underinvested in past years. These include teenagers in the District's foster care system, as well as young people who have recently aged out and are struggling to find jobs and housing.

Today, however, I will focus on one topic: Our support for the proposed one-time, one-year delay in the 60-month cut-off for families receiving TANF. This adjustment is an important part of a package of reforms that will improve several areas of our human services system, including TANF employment services, homeless services, and child welfare services, while guarding the system against the ripple effects of TANF cut-offs until reforms have taken hold.

The TANF time-limit will cut off more than 13,000 District children across 6,000 families this October. However, its potential effects are even broader. All programs that serve at-risk District children are interconnected and a major change to one affects availability of services in others. Studies from other jurisdictions tell us that families cut from TANF before they can transition to employment encounter hardships, including loss of housing and increased risk of child welfare involvement. Some studies of terminated families show as many as 15-20% or more lost housing, and agencies in many cities reported increases in requests for shelter following TANF policy changes.

Many District families who lose TANF will not simply disappear from TANF rolls. Instead, they will be forced to access crisis services to meet their needs, meaning that when our cut-off goes into effect, our homeless services and child welfare systems must be ready to absorb new families while continuing to serve existing ones. Right now, neither system is positioned to do that. Our family shelter system is already overburdened, and the Mayor's homelessness strategy relies on initial investments in affordable housing to open shelter beds more quickly. Yet another jump in demand for shelter would hinder investments, short-circuiting reform before it starts. CFSA, meanwhile, is making heavy investments in prevention services, which will be important for families who stumble after losing TANF. However, the agency assumes that in FY16, its foster care census will remain flat – something that is unlikely if 13,000 children are all cut from TANF at the same time. In a year, both programs will have

some flexibility, but now, increased demand would stop reform and thin services for everyone.

The TANF extension is not a one-off, ad hoc, policy decision. It is a crucial adjustment that will allow our human services system to move in lock-step and we urge the Council to preserve it. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for a more in-depth discussion of our position on the TANF extension, I have attached a copy of our written DHS budget testimony.