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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services
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Public Hearing:
“B23-203: The Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act of 2019”

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Introduction

Good morning Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Aubrey Edwards-Luce. I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Centerⁱ. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, 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 lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Approximately six and half years ago, we advocated for the expansion of the Grandparent Caregivers Program and we are here today to continue pushing for more support for the close relative caregivers of children.

It is my pleasure to testify in favor of the Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act ("B23-203"). B23-203 amends the Grandparent Caregiver's Pilot Program Establishment Act of 2005 by adding a definition of "close relative" and making close relatives eligible to receive the grandparent subsidy. I frequently testify based on the experience of Children's Law Center lawyers who represent the best interests of children and youth in foster care, but today I am pleased to share how the insight of lawyers in Children's Law Center's other legal programs demonstrate the positive impact that B23-203 could have for children and their relative caregivers.

Insights from the Healthy Together Program

Attorneys in Children's Law Center's Healthy Together Program represent parents and relative caregivers who have custody of minor children in housing conditions and special education matters. Pediatricians refer clients to our Healthy Together attorneys so that the attorneys can fight to remediate housing concerns in children's homes while the caregivers can focus on the children's education and development. Over our 23 years of advocacy, we have served hundreds of adult relative caregivers through our Healthy Together Program.

Children's Law Center's Healthy Together attorneys are very enthusiastic about the positive impact that this bill could have for relative caregivers. They have witnessed the significant financial stress that many of their relative caregiver clients experience when they suddenly take on the responsibility of caring for their younger relatives. While none of our relative caregiver clients would surrender the opportunity to care for the children in their lives, they do need greater financial support as they take on this large responsibility especially when they are making less than 200% of the federal income poverty level for their new household size.

Imagine being a single adult making \$48,000 annually and then suddenly adding three children to your household. Your studio apartment is not going to accommodate three children so you need to quickly find a larger living space. That will cost about \$30,000 of your annual income.ⁱⁱ Your household transportation costs increase as you

need to escort the children to daycare, medical appointments, and family events. You also have to spend more on clothing, food, and utilities.

While B23-203 will provide financial assistance to caregivers, it is important to remember that this money will reap benefits for children. Having a financially strapped caregiver makes young children more at risk for academic failure and poor health.ⁱⁱⁱ While childhood poverty is associated with a number of adverse outcomes,^{iv} “... research shows low-income children are at greater risk of experiencing the onset and symptoms of chronic health conditions, compared to children in higher-income families.”^v Providing financial assistance to low-income caregivers could lead to more positive outcomes for the children in low-income households.

Due to the lack of publicly available data, Healthy Together attorneys requested that the Committee explore the feasibility of two amendments to further strengthen B23-203. First, the attorneys recommended that the Committee explore whether B23-203’s eligibility criteria could be expanded to include relative caregivers who are caring for kids who have been residents of DC, but who are not themselves residents of DC. The borders between Maryland, Virginia and DC are very porous, our attorneys are concerned about child residents of DC that are cared for by relatives in Maryland and Virginia. We do not know whether our neighboring states offer support similar to that offered in B23-203. Nor do we know how many DC child residents are being cared for by residents of other states. But we do know the need exists. Therefore, we recommend

that the Committee explore the feasibility of providing some level of financial support for close relative caregivers of DC child residents that are not eligible for the B23-203 subsidy due to the residency requirements.

Secondly, we recommend that the Committee explore expanding the definition of “close relative caregivers” to include adult first cousins. In our case handling experience, adult first cousins can play a supportive role similar to that of an adult uncle or adult aunt. Thus, we think it would be beneficial to DC’s youth for the first cousin relationship to also be included in the definition of “close relative caregiver.”

Insights from the Families First and Pro Bono Programs

At the end of fiscal year 2018, Children’s Law Center folded its Families First Program into our Pro Bono program. Our Families First staff attorneys provided legal information, advice and representation to hundreds of caregivers, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, who were seeking legal custody or guardianship of their grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Starting this fiscal year, we began providing this type of legal assistance primarily through our partnerships with pro bono attorneys across the city.

It was through our Families First program that we clearly saw how supporting relative caregivers can prevent children from coming into foster care. We met aunts and adult brothers who told us how CFSA insisted that they take in their nephews, nieces, and siblings in order to keep the children out of foster care. They answered CFSA’s call

to stand in the gap for their family and the children avoided the trauma of being placed into foster care. Unfortunately, many of their requests for CFSA's financial or social support were met with denial, silence, or phone numbers that led to nowhere.

From our experience representing relatives through our Families First and Pro Bono programs, we are confident that close relative caregivers need more than financial assistance. Our clients who haven't had minor children in their home for decades need direction and guidance about how to care for children in the era of e-records and student portals. They need access to the internet and understanding of students' rights and supports. Many younger first-time caregivers need a crash course on how the school lottery system works and information about "Help Me Grow" and the other supports that DC has available. Therefore, we recommend that B23-203 be amended to include referrals and social systems navigation support for close relative caregivers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, thank you Councilmember Trayon White for championing this bill and thank you Chairwoman Nadeau for quickly scheduling this hearing. The sooner DC provides financial and social supports for under resourced close relative caregivers, the faster we will see positive outcomes for DC's children and youth. We hope the Committee will consider our friendly recommendations and I look forward to answering any questions.

ⁱ Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to advocate for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With nearly 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

ⁱⁱ According to Rent Jungle, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in March 2019 was \$2,782. Rent Jungle. *Rent Trend data in Washington, District of Columbia*. Retrieved from <https://www.rentjungle.com/average-rent-in-washington-rent-trends/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ T. Robbins, S. Stagman, & S. Smith. *Young Children at Risk: National and State Prevalence of Risk Factors*. National Center for Children in Poverty. Oct. 2012. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1073.html#2 (citing 2. Yeung, W. J., Linver, M. R., Brooks-Gunn, J. (2002). How money matters for young children’s development: Parental investment and family processes. *Child Development*, 73(6), 1861-1879.)

^{iv} American Academy of Pediatrics. *Poverty and Child Health in the United States*. PEDIATRICS, 137(4). (April 01, 2016). Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/137/4/e20160339>.

^v M. Mather & D. Adams. *The Risk of Negative Child Outcomes in low-Income Families*. Kids Count/Population Reference Bureau. (April 2006). Retrieved from https://stage.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/05/RiskNegOut_Families.pdf (citing Anne Case, Darren Lubotsky, and Christina Paxson, “Economic Status and Health in Childhood: The Origins of the Gradient,” *American Economic Review*, 92, no. 5 (2002): 1308-1334.)