



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Health and Human Services
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Sharra E. Greer
Policy Director
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good morning Chairwoman Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Sharra E. Greer. I am the Policy Director of Children's Law Center¹ and a resident of the District. 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 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Many of the children we see through our cases -- children in the foster care system or receiving special education services -- wouldn't need our help if it wasn't for their unmet mental health needs. Even when these children have an attorney, it can be a struggle connect them to appropriate mental health services.

There is a significant unmet need for accessible, timely and high quality mental health services for children. Despite this, the Department of Behavioral Health's (DBH) overall budget for children's programs and services is essentially flat. The budget allows the agency to continue its current programs and expand one important program.² While we would prefer further expansion of children's mental health services, we understand that this is a difficult budget year. The Mayor and the Council need to make some very tough choices in FY2017. We will be coming before this Committee, and others, later in the month to testify about cuts and failures to invest

that will have significant negative impacts for children. We believe these other priorities are more urgent than additional funds at this time for DBH. In addition, funding these other priorities will help reduce the need for mental health services.

We were initially very concerned, because the budget appears to have a \$1.9 million decrease in spending.³ A cut of this magnitude would be a significant priority to restore. However, it is our understanding, based on conversations with DBH leadership, that \$1.5 million of this apparent reduction is a product of timing - not truly a decrease in funds.⁴ The \$1.5 million is for the Wraparound DC program. The program is to prevent youth who are at risk of a placement in a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) from entering a PRTF (i.e., diversion) or to transition youth who are in a PRTF at the time of referral out of the facility (i.e., return).⁵ The funding for the program is not included in the budget, because the Letter of Intent (LOI) with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has not yet been completed. OSSE will still be transferring \$1.5 million to DBH for the Wraparound DC program in FY2017.

We are very excited that DBH will be expanding a program that has not expanded since its inception in 2010.⁶ DBH's Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation project, Healthy Futures, places mental health specialists in child development centers across the District. This program was developed with assistance from Georgetown University Center for Human Development and follows a nationally

recognized model.⁷ The program offers both center-based and child and family-centered consultation services, provided by a mental health professional, to early care and education providers and family members to promote social emotional development, prevent escalation of challenging behaviors and provide appropriate referrals and services.⁸ Program data has consistently shown positive results, including lower than national average expulsion rates and improved self-regulation in children with challenging behaviors.⁹ Healthy Futures is currently in 26 centers,¹⁰ which make up less than 5% of the child development centers and home-based child care providers in the District.¹¹ The FY2017 budget would more than double this program and expand it to 71 sites.¹²

While we are not asking for any increased funding for DBH in the FY2017 budget, we do ask that the Committee work with the agency to expand school based mental health services no later than SY2017-2018. As we noted during oversight hearings, we are very excited that, through a collaboration between DBH, DOH, and the public schools, there will be a School Health Needs Assessment, which will include the “resource mapping and mapping of current mental health and substance use screening portals in the District.”¹³ This assessment should be completed in the third quarter of FY2016. This tool will then be used to develop a comprehensive cross-agency plan for school based mental health. The *South Capital Street Memorial Amendment Act of 2012* required that a comprehensive plan with a strategy for expanding early childhood and

school based behavioral health programs and services to all schools be developed by SY2016-2017.¹⁴ This plan was not completed in time for the Mayor's FY2017 Budget Proposal. Unfortunately, because the School Year and Fiscal Year do not align, if there is no allocation in the FY2017 budget, it will be difficult to fund any expansion in time for SY2017-2018. We urge DBH and this Committee to take this into account as this plan moves forward and ensure there is funding to support it, so we do not have to wait yet another year to begin to implementing a comprehensive schools based mental health plan.

Conclusion

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

¹ 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 be the voice 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 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 8 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.

² DBH FY17 Proposed Budget and Fiscal Plan, E-27.

³ Id. see 4860.

⁴ Conversation between Judith Sandalow and Denise Dunbar, April 1 2016.

⁵ Conversation between Judith Sandalow and Denise Dunbar, April 1 2016. See also DBH FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q73 Attachment 2.

⁶ The Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program, also known as the Healthy Futures Program, was in 24 child development centers as of the first quarter of FY2011 and as of the first quarter of FY2012. See, DMH FY10 Performance Oversight Responses, Q70; DMH FY11 Performance Oversight Responses, Q45. The program was in 25 centers as of the first quarter of FY2013 and as of the first quarter of FY2014. See, DBH FY13 Performance Oversight Responses, Q45; DBH FY14 Performance Oversight Responses, Q48. The program was serving 26 centers as of the first quarter of FY2015 and as of the first quarter of FY2016. See, DBH FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q42b.

⁷ DBH FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q42b.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ There are 344 Licensed Child Development Centers and 128 Licensed Child Development Homes. *See* <http://childcareconnections.osse.dc.gov/providersearch.aspx>.

¹² Conversation between Judith Sandalow and Denise Dunbar, April 1 2016.

¹³ DBH FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q62.

¹⁴ D.C. Code § 2-1517.32(1)(B)(iii).