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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Labor and Workforce
Development, Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization, Committee on Human
Services, and Committee on Government Operations
November 1, 2017

Public Hearing:
Commission on Poverty in the District of Columbia Establishment Act of 2017

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairpersons Silverman, Bond, Nadeau, Todd and members of the Committees. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center and a resident of the District. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up in a loving family, with good health and a quality education. With 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.

Each and every child and family with whom we work is impacted by poverty. We want to thank the Council for putting a spotlight on poverty and for acknowledging that poverty is a serious problem – but also that there are solutions. We can dramatically reduce the number of DC residents living in poverty – and we can ameliorate the harms caused by living in poverty – if we choose to do so.

Poverty in the District

At Children's Law Center we meet children every day who are in crisis because they live in poverty. The research shows what we see every day: children living in poverty are subject to conditions which make it harder for them to be safe, healthy and learning. The result?

- Uncontrolled asthma that puts children's lives at risk and makes them too tired to focus in school
- Exposure to toxic stress which delays development and leads to poor school performance

- Poor housing conditions that cause serious illnesses
- Exposure to trauma which causes behavioral issues at school
- Insufficient resources to buy and prepare nutritious food
- Lack of access to safe playgrounds limiting fitness
- Unstable housing and homelessness, making children fear for their safety and be too tired and stressed to focus in school.

Some of these problems are ones that any of us could struggle with. Maybe your child is misbehaving in school. Perhaps you're a frequent visitor to your pediatrician as your child struggles with chronic health issues. It's possible you aren't pleased with the condition of your home. Families with resources can pay for tutoring, purchase medicine and hire someone to fix a leaky pipe. For families living in poverty, the solution is far from simple and may require dozens of visits to government agencies and the help of a lawyer.

In addition, the District's poorest families aren't dealing with just one of these problems, but often an interconnected series of obstacles—all originating from their socioeconomic status. The Ramirez* family is a perfect example of how interconnected the issues are. This family lived in a two bedroom apartment that was in disrepair, with mold covering the walls and a serious sewage leak. Two of the children, Jose and Matthew, were suffering from severe asthma, and were visiting the emergency room regularly. After exhausting all medical options, their pediatrician referred Ms. Ramirez to Children's Law Center. We met with Ms. Ramirez and learned that the impact of the boys' health problems threatened the entire family's well-being. Tired from ER visits and asthma attacks, the boys' grades had plummeted and they had begun misbehaving in school. Ms. Ramirez had missed so much work, staying home with sick

children and to meet with the school when the boys misbehaved, that she lost her job. Meager public benefits made it hard for Ms. Ramirez to keep up with her rent and buy nutritious food. Once a Children's Law Center attorney was involved, the landlord made necessary repairs. Since then, the entire family's health has improved. Both Matthew's and Jose's breathing improved almost immediately, they had fewer ER visits, and could once again sleep—leading to better school performance as well. Ms. Ramirez has begun looking for work and, hopefully, will find a job that will allow the family more stability.

I share the Ramirez family's story for two reasons. First, to show the way in which a lack of money can affect so many aspects of a family's well-being. The other reason is because it illustrates that there are many solutions that can either ameliorate the impact of poverty or help families climb out of poverty.

Thoughts about the Commission

Requiring that the commission include a significant number of residents who live in poverty is a smart step toward ensuring that the Commission is grounded in the real experiences, needs and strengths of low-income residents. I also applaud the requirement of representation from all eight wards. The impact of poverty is felt across the District and reducing poverty and its impact on residents living in poverty is the obligation of all of us.

As the project unfolds, Children's Law Center urges members of the Commission to focus on the interconnected and multi-generational nature of poverty. According to National Center for Children in Poverty, parental education and employment, race/ethnicity, and other factors are associated with children's experience of economic insecurity.¹ Therefore the roots of change must embody multiple generations.

I would also urge the Council to require the commission to study the role that structural racism has played and continues to play a role in keeping DC residents in poverty. Without applying a race equity lens to the analysis, I believe we will fail to find lasting, just solutions.

We agree that it is important that any commission on poverty review current programs and measure the outcomes of efforts to reduce and ameliorate poverty. Studying best practices is also important. However, we urge that the commission's focus be putting into place an actionable plan to move forward. Children's Law Center looks forward to seeing the concrete steps put into place from the commission's work.

Lastly, while a commission focusing on reducing poverty is promising, work to address the impact of poverty must continue in parallel. Work to increase affordable housing, early childhood supports, quality education – all this ongoing work must continue.

Conclusion

Thank you again for focusing the time and resources of the District on solutions that will reduce poverty and ameliorate its devastating impact on children and families. My colleagues and I can think of no greater goal than ending poverty in the District of Columbia. We stand ready and willing to help the Council and the Commission.

¹http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1145.html

²<https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&selectedRows=%7B%22states%22:%7B%22district-of-columbia%22:%7B%7D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

*Names are changed to protect client confidentiality