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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
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Good afternoon Chairman Allen and members of the Committee. My name is Kathy Zeisel. I am a resident of the District and I am a Senior Supervising Attorney at Children's Law Center.¹ I am submitting this testimony 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 almost 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.

I am an attorney in Healthy Together, our medical legal partnership, where we place attorneys throughout the city at primary care pediatric clinics with Children's National, Unity Health Care, and Mary's Center. Through these partnerships, we are referred many families where the medical staff identify health harming legal needs of their patients, including many housing conditions cases where the landlord has refused to make needed repairs and the health of the child is being severely impacted as a result.

It is through these cases that we forged a relationship with the Office of Attorney General's (OAG) Social Justice Section. We have testified many times before the Council before that DCRA is lacking systematic housing code enforcement, and that gap is still there, so we are grateful that the Attorney General stepped in to fill that gap in some of the most egregious cases. This year has been consistent with our experience in prior years in that the Social Justice Section has been open to hearing from tenant attorneys

about where we see serious issues on properties and has kept us informed, to the extent possible, so that we can ensure that tenants are able to work with them and to understand what is happening on the property. In addition to working with tenant attorneys, the Social Justice Section attorneys work by really getting out into the community and talking to the tenants to understand the issues faced in the different buildings they are working in. In addition to the receivership and consumer law cases that the unit brought in prior years, the Environmental Justice unit has also focused on housing work, especially around lead issues. As the Council is aware, Children's Law Center is especially concerned about lead hazards for children, and we applaud the work of the Attorney General in focusing on lead in housing.

I testified during oversight about the great work of this unit in the prior year, but we know that there is much more to be done to curtail the activities of problem landlords and ensure that DC residents have safe and healthy housing. Residents at large complexes such as Skyline, formerly Forest Ridge/The Vistas, are starting to see renovations at their property for the first time in decades, residents at other properties received restitution and repairs,² and residents at other properties have had repairs made thanks to the intervention of this Social Justice Unit.

The Civil Rights Section works to combat housing discrimination by bringing cases to enforce laws against source of income discrimination and other illegal practices that prevent DC residents from obtaining needed housing.³ This is even more important

as we emerge from the pandemic and residents who lost their jobs may be utilizing subsidies to pay for housing that typically make it harder for them to find safe and healthy housing. The Attorney General is again stepping in to protect DC residents where they have little other effective means of protection.

We urge the Council to fund and grow the Office of Attorney General Office's ability to do this type of work. In practice, the Office of Attorney General is the only part of DC government doing meaningful housing code enforcement work currently, and they are trying to it in a strategic and meaningful way with very limited resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

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 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 almost 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.

² See *AG Racine Announces \$624K+ Court Judgement Against Neglectful Landlord And Settlements With Two Other District Property Owners And Managers*, Feb. 23, 2021, available at: <https://oag.dc.gov/release/ag-racine-announces-624k-court-judgement-against>.

³ See e.g. *AG Racine Sues 16 Real Estate Companies and Professionals for Illegal Housing Discrimination Against District Voucher Holders*, July 23, 2020, <https://oag.dc.gov/release/ag-racine-sues-16-real-estate-companies-and>