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Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairperson Allen and members of the Committee. My name is Kathy Zeisel. I am a Senior Supervising Attorney at Children's Law Center¹, a Commissioner on the Access to Justice Commission, and a Ward 6 resident. 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 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.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony to highlight the significant impact of the DC Bar Foundation funding, in particular the Access to Justice Grant. At Children's Law Center, this grant funds a large part of our medical-legal partnership, a cutting edge collaboration that places attorneys in community pediatric primary care settings as part of the treatment team working to identify and prevent health harming legal needs.² For the past ten years, I have been an attorney at the Children's National Anacostia location working directly with families, training medical staff, and using that knowledge to work on systemic change. In our DC Bar Foundation work, we are in the highest need communities in DC, working especially in Wards 7 and 8, with teen parents, and with immigrant families.

It may come as a surprise to the people here to learn that people do not all love lawyers, but they don't. By being in the community pediatric setting, we get to start ten steps ahead with clients because their trusted pediatrician tells them we can help them with a problem that they have been trying to solve for their child, that is impacting their child's health, and that they have been trying to tackle on their own for a long time. Problems like a child ending up in the ER or hospitalized numerous times because the mice and mold in the home trigger their asthma—leading mom to miss work and risk losing her job and causing the child to miss school—like a school sending their child home early several times a week, like a child being years behind academically, like a 6 month old whose Medicaid was never turned on and so mom is getting billed for all the baby's well-child visits and cannot get the needed medications. We help solve those problems for families because we are right there working alongside the doctors. And we do that because DC Bar Foundation, using the money provided by the Council, sees the value in our work and understands how we help DC families access justice in a unique way.

Our medical-legal partnership started in 2001 with Children's National, and has grown to three Children's National sites, two Unity Health Care sites, and Mary's Center. Last year, we received 1470 new referrals, served 3,067 children and families, and trained over 1900 medical providers, parents, and other stakeholders and community members in our medical-legal partnership.

Children's Law Center is also unique because we have an in-house evaluation team. Our team has been able to look at whether our housing conditions interventions work for children with asthma, specifically whether when we get the housing conditions fixed through a legal intervention, does the child have fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations in the two years after our intervention than in the year prior to it.³ The short answer is that yes, when we improved housing conditions, the child's asthma symptoms improved.

When we thought about in terms of saving Medicaid dollars, we were able to show that for the average child we worked with, at 18 months there were over \$10,000 in decreased expenditures. For the top 10% of the children with asthma in our client population, there was a Medicaid savings average of over \$40,000. In other words, by putting a small amount of dollars into the legal intervention, we saved money in other systems. This does not account for the days of school the child was able to attend, the job the parent could keep, the apartment they were able to pay rent for, the decreased stress in their lives, and more.

We are just one program funded by the DC Bar Foundation working to help DC residents access justice in a myriad of ways. All of this is to say that the money that the Council provides to the DC Bar Foundation for the Access to Justice grants is important. It changes the lives of the residents of DC for the better, and as a grantee we thank the Council for continuing this funding.

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 Children’s Law Center was one of the first medical-legal partnerships in the country. There are now more than 300 nationwide, and George Washington University houses the National Center for Medical-legal partnerships. See <https://medical-legalpartnership.org/partnerships/>.

³ This research was presented at the AAMC 2019 Annual Conference by Dr. Holly Stevens, but has not yet been published.