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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
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Public Hearing:
Budget Oversight Hearing
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants

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Good morning Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, my name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center and a resident of the District. Children's Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children's urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify regarding the Access to Justice Initiative (Initiative). The Initiative is a critical part of the District's safety net. The Mayor's proposed 60% cut to the Initiative's budget – from \$31.689M to \$13.018M¹ – will lead to potentially catastrophic consequences for the thousands of DC residents who rely on the legal help provided by the programs that the Initiative funds. Eliminating the FY22 and FY23 increases means cutting services at a time when need is increasing in many areas of our work. This cut will put at risk the health, housing, education and economic stability of District residents. As such, we urge the Committee restore the Initiative's funding to FY23 levels.

Children's Law Center has relied on funding for our Healthy Together Medical-Legal Partnership through the Initiative since its inception. Healthy Together is a cutting-edge collaboration that places attorneys in community pediatric primary care settings as part of the treatment team working to identify, prevent and fix the root causes of a child's health problem. Unsafe housing, inadequate education, exposure to violence, lack of good health care and other problems related to poverty, trauma and racism can harm children's physical and behavioral health. Together with funding from private sources, the Initiative's funding has allowed us to expand and then consistently maintain our presence in Southeast and Northeast DC.

With the help of ATJ funding we are able to:

- Reach more than 1,000 children and families each year;
- Resolve problems that impact children's health related to housing conditions, housing security, special education, school choice, developmental issues for infants and toddlers, bullying, health care access, public benefits, guardianship and custody;
- Meet families in their own neighborhoods by putting lawyers onsite at THEARC, the Anacostia Clinic and Unity on Minnesota Avenue;
- Give hundreds of parents and caregivers the information they need to advocate for their own children;
- Train 75+ pediatricians and other medical staff each year to solve problems related to housing, school and public benefits that are impacting a child's health – and prevent the need for a lawyer;
- Avoid \$14.1M in Medicaid costs over a three-year period (for entire program).

These statistics mask the human cost – the opportunity lost and the suffering prolonged – when a child or a parent is unable to secure legal assistance. Let me share the experience of one of our client families:

We started working with Ms. Deans when her apartment flooded with sewage in 2020. While we worked to get the damage fixed, we saw the severe impact that unhealthy housing conditions was having on her son's education. Her son, who has cerebral palsy and learning disabilities, was already struggling with virtual learning – and the flood made it that much harder. Children's Law Center secured new educational evaluations, an updated support plan and a dedicated aide for her son when he returned to in-person learning.

There is also a financial cost to cutting legal services. A return-on-investment analysis established that our upstream legal interventions, alongside the treatment provided by our medical partners, kept children out of the hospital and emergency room and resulted in significant Medicaid cost avoidance – on average \$10,000 in the first 18 months alone for housing conditions cases. Cutting the Initiative's funding is truly penny wise and pound foolish. Without legal assistance to address health-harming housing and education issues, children will go to the emergency room and spend time in the hospital at great human and financial cost. Not only do these hospital stays cost more than the legal intervention, but they prevent children from attending school and often make it difficult for parents to maintain employment.

The funding provided through the Initiative is used exclusively for direct legal services, but the expertise, experience and relationships we develop as a result have important, positive ripple effects. Using private funding, Children's Law Center places hundreds of cases with volunteer lawyers at area law firms and corporations. It also allows Children's Law Center to provide its expertise to the District government, the DC Council and the DC Courts through participation on the Medical Care Advisory

Committee, the Citizen's Review Panel, at DC Council hearings, Court committees and in other similar forums.

Despite the generous support from the Initiative as well as significant support from individuals, law firms, corporations and foundations, we are not able to meet the needs of all the children and families who reach out to us. This dramatic cut to funding will mean we will have to turn more people away. We are just one of the many programs that will be impacted by this cut. The result would be devastating to the District's low-income community. We urge you restore funding to FY23 levels.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹ Mayor's Proposed FY 2024 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 2 Agency Budget Chapters – Part I, FO0 – Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Table FO0-4 (3010), p. C-143.