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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety  
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Public Hearing:  
Performance Oversight Hearing  
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (Access to Justice)

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Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, my name is Kathy Zeisel and I am a Ward 7 resident and the Director of Special Legal Projects at Children's Law Center and a Commissioner on the Access to Justice Commission. 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 provide testimony to highlight the significant impact of the DC Bar Foundation funding provided through the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG). Before I get into the details of the many ways that this funding allows Children's Law Center to work in the DC community, I want to thank the Council for ensuring the funding remained level last year. This funding is the cornerstone of legal services in DC, and without it, many residents would be without lawyers against landlords forcing them to live in unhealthy housing or evicting them, predatory lenders trying to illegally collect debts, batterers trying to intimidate them out of pursuing custody or protection orders, and many other

circumstances where a lawyer is essential. The funding also protects access to lawyers by ensuring that non-native English speakers can access legal services in their native language thanks to the Community Legal Interpreter Bank and by making sure that lawyers can continue to practice law thanks to the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP).

Children's Law Center has been a recipient for many years of the Access to Justice ("ATJ") grant, and for the first time last year was fortunate to receive funds under the Civil Legal Counsel Project Program ("CLCPP") grants as well. At Children's Law Center, the ATJ grant funds part of our medical-legal partnership, an innovative 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. Our medical-legal partnership started in 2002 with Children's National, and has grown to five Children's National sites, two Unity Health Care sites, and Mary's Center. Last year, we received over 1300 new referrals and opened over 500 cases, with over 50% of our clients coming from wards 7 and 8. We also use these grants to train our medical partners, parents and caregivers, and community members.

I want to share with you some examples of how our work specifically helps DC residents by accessing lawyers. Through our ATJ work, we often help children referred to us by their doctors when they are not receiving the supports they need in school. In one recent case, we worked with Ms. Jeffries<sup>1</sup> after her daughter, Marina, was

diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome after being assaulted at school and her school did not give her the necessary accommodations. She feared for her safety, which exacerbated her anxiety and depression, plus she suffered from severe migraines after the concussion. She went from being an honor roll student to barely being able to attend school. Although her mother was fighting for her, the school was not listening. Children's Law Center advocated alongside Ms. Jeffries to get an appropriate plan in place and now Marina is back on track to graduate.<sup>i</sup>

The ATJ grant funds also provide attorneys to represent both children and families involved in complex custody cases. One example of a case that we worked on and continue to provide support to the family is the Robertson family. When her sister became ill, Ms. Robertson stepped forward to take custody of her niece and nephew, made extra challenging by needing to learn how to navigate DC's special education system for her nephew. CLC, with help from pro bono lawyers in the District, helped Ms. Robertson navigate the courts to ensure permanency for the children, and we are now providing legal services to support her nephew's education.<sup>ii</sup>

Our CLCPP funding allows us to advocate for families whose health is being impacted by the housing conditions they live in, most often where the landlord's failure to repair mold or to properly exterminate for mice, rats, and roaches leads to a child's asthma being exacerbated in the home even when they are taking all of their asthma medications.<sup>iv</sup> Just last week a client shared the happy news that she found a healthier

home during an interview with ABC Channel 7. We met her last summer after she had already spent three years fighting DCHA for healthier housing. We pursued a housing conditions case and pressured DCHA to look at other options. She reported an almost immediate change after our involvement, but unfortunately it was only after we were able to help her move with a voucher that she was able to be in healthy housing for the long term.<sup>v</sup> But every month that goes without healthy housing is a month where children are facing health issues – and added emotional trauma on the family.

And, we use the data we get from our cases to better understand how to serve our clients. Over the past two years, we worked with Children’s National Hospital to map where children with asthma live in DC, where our housing conditions cases, and where other housing conditions complaints are in DC to create an interactive map of asthma housing conditions in DC.<sup>vi</sup> This map is driving important housing conditions work in DC, including work within our CLCPP grant. Through our Evaluation and Learning team, we know that our work in getting remediation done in homes stops children from going to the emergency room for their asthma, and saves Medicaid money. We also know that stabilizing children with permanent homes and getting them the education they need has long term positive effects for them, and long term cost savings for DC.<sup>iii</sup>

And we do all of this work because the 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.

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 through the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants for the Access to Justice and CLCPCC grants is critically 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Jeffries and Marina are pseudonyms being used at the request of the clients.