



501 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NW · 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[childrenslawcenter.org](http://childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety  
April 25, 2024

Public Hearing:  
Performance Oversight Hearing  
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (Access to Justice)

Kathy Zeisel, Director of Special Legal Projects  
Children's Law Center

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.

At Children's Law Center, we use the Access to Justice funding to make sure that children get the services they need at school and to fight illegal school suspensions and expulsions. This often enables these students to stabilize in their school placements, decreasing their absences, moving closer to successful graduation, and allowing their parents to spend less time at school dealing with problems.

In one case, elementary school had been fine for Nevaeh.<sup>1</sup> But when she came back to in-person middle school after the pandemic closures, Ms. Black saw significant changes. Nevaeh had become withdrawn and anxious. She had trouble concentrating and significant memory issues, unable to remember details from the family vacations

they'd taken together a few years prior – even one to New York to see “Frozen” on Broadway. Other parents came to Ms. Black and told her they'd noticed something was wrong, that something had changed with Nevaeh.

Ms. Black asked Nevaeh's school multiple times for an evaluation, but – even as Nevaeh's grades started to drop – they said that the counselor hadn't seen anything wrong and wouldn't do a full evaluation.

“After they said she was okay,” Ms. Black explained, “I didn't know I had options, didn't know how to go about it. She never missed school – I took her to school every day – but it was very hard for her.”

Things continued to get worse for Nevaeh, especially following her mother's passing in 2022. Ms. Black spoke to her pediatrician about Nevaeh's symptoms and what the school had said. The pediatrician referred Nevaeh to a child psychiatrist, who recommended therapy for anxiety and processing trauma, as well as an advocate.

While Nevaeh began therapy, Ms. Black worked with Children's Law Center Staff Attorney to make sure Nevaeh would get the right support at school as well. Once those supports were in place, Neveah began to thrive in school and it became one of her favorite places to go, something Ms. Black never would have predicted at the beginning of the year.

We use the funds to help children find stable and safe homes by helping legalize permanent homes through third party custody and adoption and by acting as guardians ad litem in complex custody cases.

We attack health inequities where children in wards 7 and 8 are 20 times more likely to go to the hospital for their asthma by keeping those children out of the hospital and emergency departments because we force landlords to provide safe and habitable rental housing. And, by keeping children out of the hospital, we save DC an average of \$10,000 per child with asthma per year and significantly more for higher utilizers, avoiding over \$14 million in Medicaid costs in the last three years. We also preserve affordable housing by ensuring that bad landlords do not allow the conditions to continue to degrade to the point the building becomes uninhabitable.

We help homeless families and families in Rapid Rehousing obtain safe and stable housing. We work with Ms. Bowen and her children, who are in Rapid Rehousing for the third time, and are battling terrible housing conditions while her daughter Deveah has been hospitalized repeatedly for asthma and pneumonia. This week, with our assistance, they received news that they are finally connected to permanent housing supports. *See [Story](#).*

We provide extensive training and mentoring of pro bono attorneys from virtually every major law firm, government agency, and many solo practitioners to represent parents and caregivers using access to justice funding.

We use the Access to Justice funds to fund our medical legal partnership, which places attorneys in the community at primary care pediatric health centers with Children's National, Unity Health Care, and Mary's Center. Because of these partnerships, DC residents find their lawyers through their trusted pediatricians, who are trained by us on how to spot legal issues. We are in the community where DC residents live and work so they can more easily find us. In 2023, we talked to over 1400 residents about their legal problems to represent them or to make sure they had the legal information or resources they need.<sup>2</sup>

The proposed cuts to the funding for legal services organizations jeopardize our ability to provide these key services and to provide them in the community.

The proposed cuts jeopardize the ability of legal services attorneys to do this work at all because the funding provides the loan repayment funding that many attorneys depend on to be able to afford to the work after taking out high loans for law school and then working at non-profits after law school.

The proposed cuts mean that pro bono attorneys would no longer have access to training and mentoring that they need from the legal services community.

The proposed cuts would devastate the progress that DC as a city has made to increase the access to justice for DC residents over the years. In addition to education and family law, we have built up access to lawyers for evictions and eviction prevention, for survivors of domestic violence, for debt and consumer law, for

immigration, and for many other life-changing problems that DC residents face every day and for which they need access to legal advice to ensure they can fairly resolve the issues. Yet, a two-thirds cut to the budget would mean that most of these residents simply would not have access to a lawyer. They would change what our court system looks like in DC, meaning that even more DC residents would go to court with a lawyer or even without legal advice.

DC has consistently made steps forward to helping our residents access justice more equally and to ensure that the legal service providers can work with all of the other services funded by the city and the Courts. We should not take a giant leap backwards this year. We must find money to restore the Access to Justice funds.

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms at the request of client.

<sup>2</sup> Attached is a reference sheet with more information about Children's Law Center's work under the Access to Justice grants.

# ACCESS TO JUSTICE FUNDING IMPROVES CHILDREN'S HEALTH

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. Through our Healthy Together Medical-Legal Partnership, Children's Law Center partners with pediatricians in eight community health centers and clinics to find and fix the root causes of a child's health problem. Last year, we received **over 1,300 new referrals** from our partners.

We have relied on funding for our Healthy Together program through the Access to Justice program since its inception. Together with funding from private sources, this funding has allowed us to expand and then consistently maintain our presence in Wards 5, 7 and 8.

With funding from both the Access to Justice and Civil Legal Counsel Project Program grants last year, we were able to provide legal services to District children and families who were referred to us by our health clinic partners and:

- Reach approximately **600 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 making lawyers part of the medical teams at THEARC, the Children's National Anacostia Clinic and Unity on Minnesota Avenue along with five other clinics and health care centers across the District;
- **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; and
- **Avoid \$14.1M in Medicaid costs** over a three-year period (for entire Healthy Together program).

Although the funding is for direct legal services provided by Children's Law Center, the expertise, experience and relationships developed have had important ripple effects:

- Hundreds of additional children and families are now helped each year by **volunteer lawyers** working in the District's major law firms; and
- Children's Law Center now **provides its expertise to the District government, the DC Council and the DC Courts** through participation on the Medical Care Advisory Committee and the Citizen's Review Panel, and at DC Council hearings, Court committees and other similar forums.

## The Impact on DC Children and Families

**Marina:** We worked with Ms. Jeffries\* 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 struggling in 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.



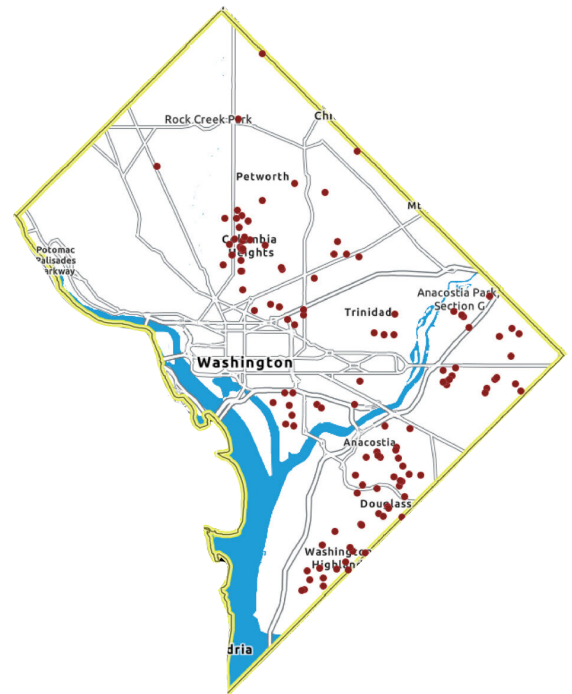
**The Robertson Family:** When her sister became ill, Ms. Robertson stepped forward to take custody of her niece and nephew, made extra challenging by needing to learn how to navigate DC's special education system for her nephew. Children's Law Center, with help from pro bono lawyers in the District, 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.



**Tiffany and her family:** We often 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. We met Tiffany\* and her children 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. Tiffany 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.

We meet hundreds of families like Tiffany's every year – and know that thousands of children live in apartment complexes with the same unhealthy conditions. Every month that goes without healthy housing is a month where children are facing health issues – and added emotional trauma on the family.

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 create an interactive map of the DC apartment buildings with the highest rates of pediatric asthma and worst asthma hazard conditions based on our housing conditions cases and where other housing conditions complaints are in DC. This map is driving important housing conditions work in DC, including work within our CLCPP grant.



- Each red dot = multi-family buildings that display both high rates of asthma-related pediatric emergency department visits and unhealthy housing conditions that have been reported to DC government for violations.

\*Ms. Jeffries, Marina and Tiffany are pseudonyms being used at the request of the clients.