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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Housing
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Public Hearing:
Performance Oversight Hearing
District of Columbia Housing Authority

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson White and members of the Committee. My name is Makenna Osborn. I am a Policy Attorney at 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 the opportunity to testify today regarding the performance of the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA). Each year Children's Law Center works with hundreds of families who are trying to provide their children with a safe, healthy, and stable place to call home but cannot afford market rent in DC.¹ DCHA's core mission is to provide quality affordable housing for District residents in this position through the operation of public housing in DC and the administration of federally and locally funded permanent housing vouchers.²

As Children's Law Center has raised in previous Performance Oversight hearings, based on the experiences of our clients we believe poor conditions in public housing

properties and administrative delays in the voucher program are undermining DCHA's ability to fulfill its mission.³ Children's Law Center was therefore encouraged to see that DCHA is in the process of implementing changes to its technology systems that will allow public housing residents to submit and track requests for repairs online via RentCafe.⁴ We are hopeful these changes will address the unreliability of DCHA's existing system⁵ and improve transparency of the work order process. Additionally, Children's Law Center appreciates DCHA's collaboration with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to connect families that previously received rental assistance through DHS's Family Re-Housing Stabilization Program (FRSP) with Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) vouchers so they can maintain housing stability.⁶ We urge the Committee to continue tracking the implementation of these initiatives and working with DCHA on how to achieve further improvements to 1) the timeliness and quality of public housing repairs⁷ and 2) the processes for reviewing voucher applications and helping voucher holders utilize existing resources to sign leases in stable housing.⁸

For the purposes of today's hearing, my testimony will focus on the experience of a particular group of Children's Law Center's clients who receive vouchers from DCHA — youth aging out of foster care. Children's Law Center attorneys serve as guardians-ad-litem for children in the care and custody of DC's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), representing several hundred children in foster care each year.⁹ In DC, when youth in foster care reach the age of 21 they "age out" of the system meaning they are

exited from CFSA's care and CFSA is no longer responsible for providing them with a place to live. DCHA plays an important role in ensuring these youth have housing stability while they transition out of foster care. As part of the HCVP program DCHA receives and administers federally funded Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers, which can provide older youth exiting foster care with up to five years of rental assistance.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Children's Law Center's clients — and most youth aging out of CFSA's care — who apply for FUP vouchers struggle obtain housing through this program. Effective communication and focused collaboration between DCHA and CFSA are needed to connect FUP voucher applicants with a stable housing situation before they exit foster care.

Eligible Foster Youth in DC Struggle to Access Stable Housing Through Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers Administered by DCHA

Navigating the transition from foster care to independent living is full of challenges for youth and one of the biggest is securing and maintaining housing. This is the first time most of these young people are renting an apartment and paying bills on their own and it is a moment when they are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.¹¹ Recognizing these unique challenges and vulnerabilities, the federal government offers youth exiting foster care up to five years of rental assistance with a FUP voucher.¹² The goal of FUP vouchers is that youth will be able to use the voucher to secure a rental unit *before* they exit the foster care system so they can transition directly from care to a stable housing situation.

DCHA receives funding for FUP vouchers as part of the Housing Choice Voucher program and partners with CFSA to distribute them to District youth aging out of foster care.¹³ CFSA helps eligible youth submit a FUP voucher application to DCHA and then DCHA treats it like any other Housing Choice Voucher: reviewing the application for eligibility, issuing the voucher if approved, and requiring voucher recipients and their prospective landlords to go through the Request for Tenancy Approval (RFTA) process before signing a lease.¹⁴

The District recently removed barriers at CFSA that prevented many of our clients from even applying for a FUP voucher.¹⁵ However, being able to apply is just one step in the process. In the past year, all of Children’s Law Center’s clients who were interested in FUP successfully submitted a voucher application but that has not translated into more of our clients exiting foster care with stable housing in place — the entire purpose of FUP. Our clients’ experience is consistent with CFSA’s most recent report on the housing status for youth aging out of foster care which found that of the 34 youth who aged out of care in FY24, 20 applied for a FUP voucher but as of January 2025 — three months into FY25 — only 6 FUP applicants had successfully received and used a FUP voucher to move into a unit.¹⁶ While it is an improvement that more former foster youth in DC have moved into housing with a FUP voucher, it is still less than 20% of the youth who aged out of CFSA’s care in FY24 and it is not clear if these youth moved into their housing before or after they exited care.

Children’s Law Center believes this is due to delays in both the application review and lease up processes and the unique challenges faced by foster youth trying to rent an apartment for the first time with the added administrative burdens of a voucher. It is our view that DCHA likely needs to provide a deeper level of individual support for foster youth navigating the rest of the process — from securing the voucher, to finding an apartment, to getting the landlord to fill out and submit the required paperwork, to passing inspection, to finally — moving in. More information is needed to fully understand this problem, identify the root causes of delays, and design effective solutions. To this end, Children’s Law Center asks this Committee to convene a joint hearing on FUP vouchers with the Committee on Youth Affairs, with participation from DCHA and CFSA. We are committed to working with both agencies and Committees to bring clarity to this issue and ensure that District youth can reliably use FUP vouchers to secure housing before they age out of care.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions the Committee may have.

¹ Children’s Law Center’s innovative medical legal partnership, Healthy Together, places attorneys at primary care pediatric clinics throughout the city with Children’s National, Unity Health Care, and Mary’s Center to receive referrals from pediatric providers for assistance with non-medical barriers to a child’s health and well-being, including poor housing conditions. Many of these clients live in some form of subsidized housing and/or are in unsanitary or inadequate housing because they cannot afford rent in DC. See Children’s Law Center, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/ourimpact/health/>.

² District of Columbia Housing Authority 2025 Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q1 (March 3, 2025), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/675> [hereinafter DCHA 2025 Performance Oversight Responses].

³ *See* Makenna Osborn, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing (March 2, 2023), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CLC_PerformanceOversightTestimony_DCHA.pdf; Makenna Osborn, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing (February 22, 2024), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DCHA-2024-Performance-Oversight-Childrens-Law-Center-Written-Testimony-2.21.2024.pdf>.

⁴ DCHA 2025 Performance Oversight Responses, *supra* note 2, response to Q78(a).

⁵ Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing, p. 4-6 (October 26, 2023), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/138> (“Unfortunately, DCHA’s current work order system too often falls apart at this first hurdle. Children’s Law Center has heard from public housing residents who diligently wrote down the identification number provided to them only to be told there is no record of their request the next time they called to check on its progress. During intakes with potential clients, we regularly learn that a public housing tenant had to report the same issue to DCHA multiple times before a work order is even issued.”).

⁶ *See* DCHA 2025 Performance Oversight Responses, *supra* note 2, response to Q61.

⁷ Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing, p. 4-13 (October 26, 2023), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/138>.

⁸ Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing, p. 13-18 (October 26, 2023), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/138>.

⁹ Children’s Law Center attorneys represent children who are the subject of abuse and neglect cases in DC’s Family Court. CLC attorneys fight to find safe homes and ensure that children receive the services they need to overcome the trauma that first brought them into the child welfare system. DC Children’s Law Center, About Us, *available at*: <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/content/about-us>.

¹⁰ For information on FUP vouchers *see* Family Unification Program (FUP), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of Housing Choice Vouchers, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family (accessed March 10, 2025); Ruth White, *Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers*, National Low Income Housing Coalition (April 4, 2020), *available at*: [https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2020/4-04_Family-Unification-Program-\(FUP\)-Vouchers.pdf](https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2020/4-04_Family-Unification-Program-(FUP)-Vouchers.pdf).

¹¹ *See* Peggy Kelly, *Risk and Protective Factors Contributing to Homelessness Among Foster Care Youth: An Analysis of the National Youth in Transition Database*, Vol. 108, 104589 (January 2020), *available at*: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740919305006?via%3Dihub>; Micah Bertoli, *From Foster Care to Homelessness: How the Aging Out Process Affects Youth*, *Invisible People* (October 15, 2020), <https://invisiblepeople.tv/from-foster-care-to-homelessness-how-the-aging-out-process-affects-youth/> (accessed March 10, 2025).

¹² Ruth White, *Family Unification Program (FUP) Vouchers*, National Low Income Housing Coalition (April 4, 2020), *available at*: [https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2020/4-04_Family-Unification-Program-\(FUP\)-Vouchers.pdf](https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2020/4-04_Family-Unification-Program-(FUP)-Vouchers.pdf).

¹³ Family Unification Program (FUP), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of Housing Choice Vouchers, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family (accessed March 10, 2025).

¹⁴ This understanding of the application and utilization process for FUP vouchers is based on communications with CFSA and a presentation from CFSA to the Youth System Working Group of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH). Youth System Working Group, Interagency Council on

Homelessness, Meeting on October 22, 2024, slides and notes available on file with Children’s Law Center.

¹⁵ See Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Youth Affairs, p. 13 (February 13, 2025), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/T.Weerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-CFSA_FINAL-1.pdf.

¹⁶ Child and Family Services Agency, Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities: Housing for Youth Aging Out of Agency Custody Annual Status Report 2024, p. 5 (February 28, 2025), <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/57276/Introduction/RC26-0037-Introduction.pdf?Id=207414>.