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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)

Judith Sandalow, CEO
Children's Law Center

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, my name is Judith Sandalow. I am a DC resident and the CEO of Children's Law Center. 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.

This is by far the most challenging time DC children have faced in my 25-year tenure as the leader of Children's Law Center. The children and families that Children's Law Center works with face cuts to critical supports in both the federal and local DC budgets: programs and services that are essential to giving children a stable foundation of family, health and education.

It is more important than ever that children have tenacious advocates by their side to ensure they can access justice. But to do that, we need the DC Council to continue funding the Access to Justice grants through OVSJG. The mayor has proposed cutting the funds by 2/3, by over \$20 million, putting in doubt the ability of the legal

services community to serve DC residents. At Children's Law Center, these funds provide the majority of the support for our innovative medical-legal partnership, Healthy Together.

Healthy Together partners with Children's National, Mary's Center, and Unity Healthcare to improve the lives of DC children facing non-medical barriers to health. Whether it is reducing ER visits for children with asthma by forcing bad landlords to fix unhealthy housing conditions, ensuring parents can put food on the table and a roof over their children's heads by helping them maintain housing vouchers or obtain SSI benefits, or ensuring children stay in school and learn by helping them access learning supports – our legal services lead to real results – and save money.

In fact, our research has shown that our legal interventions save three dollars in Medicaid for every dollar spent. Our housing conditions advocacy saves on average \$10,000 in Medicaid in the first 18 months alone. We know – based on reports back from our clients – that the students we work with miss fewer days of school and their parents can work more because of our legal support.

In one of our education cases, we worked with Ms. Harrington, the mother of ten-year old Kamari, to advocate for increased supports in his IEP. The school had been calling her multiple times per week complaining about Kamari's behavior but refused to add social emotional support services to his IEP. It was not until she brought on a

lawyer from Children's Law Center to help advocate for the right support for his current needs that they agreed to what she had been asking for on her own. Together, we secured new evaluations and assessments that led to an updated IEP and more individualized supports. Now, Kamari is thriving at school.

We stood alongside Ms. J and her daughter DJ when the recurring sewage leaks in their apartment caused mold and led to holes that let mice and roaches into the unit, worsening DJ's asthma and making it difficult to keep under control. After a referral from DJ's pediatrician, Children's Law Center's attorney helped Ms. J get the needed repairs to her unit and DJ's health improved significantly.

In addition to representing individual families, we are also working with organizers to represent tenants to advocate for building-wide housing conditions improvements, a model we hope to replicate to help stabilize housing for even more DC residents.

We are also supporting children by acting as guardians ad litem in complex custody cases and representing third-party caregivers who want to provide a home to children whose parents are unable to care for them. Through this work, we help to ensure stable, loving homes for these children.

All of this important work by CLC and all of our legal services partners is at risk if Access to Justice funds are not restored by the DC Council. I ask you to **fully restore**

these funds so that our work, and the work of our sister organizations, can continue on behalf of DC residents.

I have attached some additional information on our work, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Access to Justice Funding

Improves DC Children's Health & Education

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 1,850 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 as well as other neighborhoods across the District where families need support in addressing health-harming legal needs.

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 nearly 2,000 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;
- In partnership with Children's National, Mary's Center and Unity Healthcare, we meet families in their own neighborhoods by integrating lawyers into the medical teams at eight clinics and health care centers across the District;
- Give hundreds of parents and caregivers the information they need to advocate for their own children;
- Trained nearly 1,500 pediatricians, medical staff and other partners 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

Kamari and Ms. Harrington: Kamari's mother, Ms. Harrington, advocated for him to get an IEP with specialized support following his ADHD diagnosis in kindergarten. But after several years, the old plan was no longer working. When he still struggled with paying attention and staying on task, the school called Ms. Harrington multiple times a week complaining of Kamari's behavior – but wouldn't discuss her concerns about his behavioral health supports. She brought on a lawyer from Children's Law Center to help advocate for the right support for his current needs. Together, we secured new evaluations and assessments that led to an updated IEP and a dedicated aide who is helping Kamari thrive in school.

Tala: We helped Tala* find family stability during a difficult time. She reached back out to her Children's Law Center lawyer a few years later when she was in college and had trouble with financial aid. We stepped in to support her with an appeal and ensure she secured the aid she needed to continue attending college.



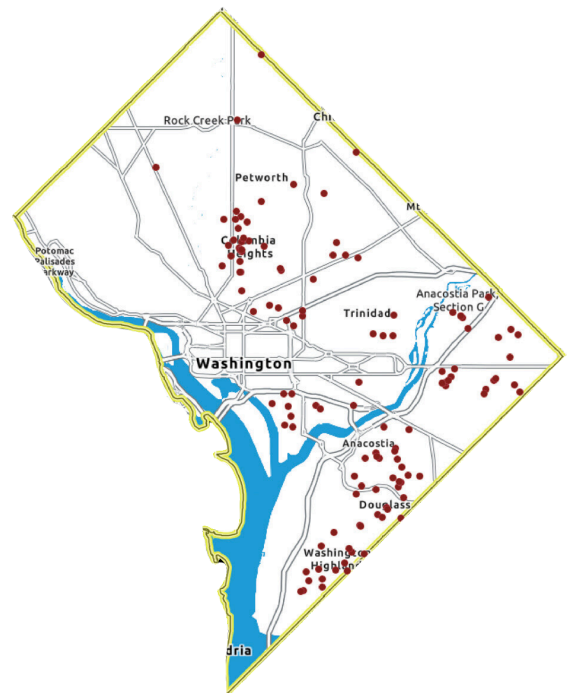
*Children's Law Center works hard to protect our clients' confidentiality. A pseudonym and stock photo are being used based on the client's request. All other details are true.

Ms. J and DJ: For more than two years, a reoccurring leak brought sewage water from the unit above Ms. J and her daughter DJ down into their bathroom – causing mold and mushrooms to grow across the ceiling – and holes in the floor and windows led to mice and insect infestations. DJ has asthma, and she'd startle awake when mice darted across her bed at night and get worked up until she was wheezing uncontrollably. The property manager ignored Ms. J's reports, delayed responding, and attempted fixes so poorly the mice and sewage water quickly returned.

DJ's pediatrician connected Ms. J with Children's Law Center. We were able to leverage a recent settlement agreement between the landlord and the DC Office of the Attorney General over property-wide housing code violations to get lasting repairs made for Ms. J's apartment.

We meet hundreds of families like Ms. J'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. We worked with Children's National Hospital over a two-year period 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.