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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Youth Affairs
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Public Hearing:
Child Abuse Investigation Multidisciplinary Team Certification Amendment Act of
2025

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson Parker, and members of the Committee on Youth Affairs. My name is Chris Gamble, and I am a Behavioral Health Policy Analyst at 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. Prior to joining Children's Law Center, I worked at Safe Shores—The DC Children's Advocacy Center, where I provided support as a Client Advocate to over four hundred families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Child Abuse Investigation Multidisciplinary Team Certification Amendment Act of 2025. CLC represents over half the children in DC's foster care system, some of whom have experienced physical or sexual abuse. When children experience trauma like this, accountability for the person responsible is of paramount importance, yet healing is required, no matter the outcome of investigative proceedings. Without intervention, abused children are at higher risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disrupted

intimate relationships in later life, and further revictimization. Attending to both the legal and emotional fallout of abuse is challenging for any one person or institution to handle, necessitating a collaborative approach.

Since the 1980s, CACs have served the purpose of increasing coordination between all entities involved in abuse investigations and providing child-friendly environments for forensic interviews as well as medical and mental health services.¹ Before CACs existed, children who disclosed abuse would often have to tell what happened to them to multiple people in multiple settings over the course of an investigation, exacerbating the potential for re-traumatization. There are now nearly 960 CACs across the United States, including within tribal communities and on military installations.²

The proposed legislation mandates that an accredited CAC be a member of the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT). We support this legislation, with a few recommended changes to strengthen its intent. My testimony today will outline the role of CACs in MDT investigations and highlight the advantages of having an independent, accredited CAC as a member of DC's MDT. Additionally, we recommend that the Committee use language in the proposed bill that clearly identifies an accredited CAC as a required MDT member, and that Safe Shores has the ongoing funding necessary to do its vital work for DC children.

CAC Neutrality Is Critical For District Youth And Families To Receive Trusted, High-Quality Services

Effective responses to reports of child abuse and neglect are timely, objective, and decrease the chance of re-traumatization to children and families.³ The Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) approach to abuse investigations makes this possible. MDTs generally consist of professionals from victim advocacy, child protective services, law enforcement, and criminal prosecution, as well as the medical and mental health fields.⁴ By bringing these entities together and keeping them from operating in silos, the MDT approach minimizes the number of times a child has to talk about their abuse—ideally just once—and allows information sharing between agencies that increases the effectiveness of the investigation.⁵ Children’s Advocacy Centers (CAC) are key members in MDT investigations.

Safe Shores is the District’s sole CAC, operating for 30 years to provide “survivor-centered intervention, hope, and healing for children and families affected by abuse, trauma, and violence in the District of Columbia”.⁶ Children’s Law Center clients have been forensically interviewed by and received advocacy support and trauma-focused therapy from Safe Shores staff, giving them the opportunity to seek justice and heal in a child-friendly environment. All children deserve the same opportunity, and securing the role of CACs in MDT investigations is a critical way to ensure that happens.

We support the proposed legislation's requirement for the District's CAC to demonstrate high service quality through accreditation. CACs that undergo the rigorous accreditation process conducted by the National Children's Alliance (NCA) are recognized as expert institutions following strong national standards.⁷ Codifying accreditation as a requirement protects children by assuring the CAC providing services to them is implementing best practices.

Unfortunately, CAC accreditation does not seem to be understood across DC government. At the Committee of the Whole's FY26 Budget Hearing, Budget Director Jenny Reed responded to a question about the continuous cuts to Safe Shores' funding by stating that "CFSA can do that work that is outsourced to the organization, Safe Shores."⁸ This alarming proposition misunderstands the relationship between Safe Shores and CFSA as members of the MDT and proposes a restructuring of the MDT that undermines its purpose and could be detrimental to child victims of abuse.

Nationally, over three-quarters of CACs are structured as nonprofits.⁹ Only 14% are government run and just 3% are operated by child welfare service agencies.¹¹ While some government run CACs are accredited, those operated by independent non-profits are better suited to act as neutral parties in MDT investigations, coordinating the joint activities of investigators¹² and prosecutors¹³ without feeling beholden to any specific agency priorities.

Expert researchers in child forensic interviewing identify forensic interviewers as, “neutral professional[s] utilizing research and practice-informed techniques.”¹⁴ Neutrality protects the integrity of the interview in part by preventing the child from feeling pressure to provide information for the sake of serving an investigator’s goals. This neutrality would be jeopardized if a CFSA employee were responsible for conducting forensic interviews. It is not about whether a child knows who an interviewer’s employer is, but rather that the interviewer may approach the process with a bias informed by their responsibility to agency priorities, even if unintentionally. Families also benefit from working with victim advocates not employed by investigating agencies, allowing a foundation of trust to guide the support they receive that can be more difficult to form with law enforcement and child welfare professionals.

While all MDT members work toward children’s health and safety, the outcome of an investigation does not determine how an independent CAC serves the families that come through its doors. Government agencies are subject to leadership changes and political factors that could shift the priorities of or focus on CAC functions, ultimately impacting the type of support children and families who have experienced abuse receive. We urge the Committee to protect and uplift the importance of neutrality whenever there are suggestions of shifting CAC responsibilities to government entities.

New Language In The Proposed Legislation Should Make Clear That An Accredited CAC Is A Required MDT Member

The proposed subsection (c) states that “The MDT shall make reasonable efforts to enter into an agreement for services with an accredited Children’s Advocacy Center for the purposes of coordinating the MDT investigation.”¹⁵ We have some recommended changes to make clear the legislation’s purpose of ensuring an accredited CAC is part of the MDT.

While “shall make reasonable efforts” is intended to be stronger language than the current “shall be requested”, it doesn’t make clear that an accredited CAC must be a member of the MDT. To ensure the District requires having an accredited CAC as part of its MDT, we recommend removing the first sentence of proposed subsection (c) and instead adding “An Accredited Children’s Advocacy Center” as point (D) under subsection (a) (1), making it read, “A MDT shall consist of one or more representatives of the: ... (D) An Accredited Children’s Advocacy Center.” This would better reflect the reality that the District’s current CAC is already a member of the MDT and would ensure that an accredited CAC would continue to be required to be a member in the future.

From conversations with Councilmember Parker’s staff, we understand that the term “agreement of services” is meant to serve as the legislative foundation for the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that all MDT member organizations sign, which specifies coordination procedures for investigations. However, the wording of proposed subsection (c) makes it sound like the MDT is a self-contained entity separate

from the CAC rather than a team constituted of several member organizations. The CAC is part of the MDT, so we recommend that “agreement of services” instead be added to the current subsection (b) making it read, “The MDT shall adopt a written child abuse protocol and agreement of services...” which would maintain an accurate framing of how the member organizations that make up the MDT operate together. The legislation could also just use the term “Memorandum of Agreement” instead of “agreement of services”. We recommend that the Committee engage with all MDT member organizations to confirm that the language of the bill supports optimal team functioning.

The Committee Must Ensure Dedicated, Sustainable CAC Funding

The proposed bill means to ensure the service excellence of the CAC member of the MDT. To ensure that DC continues to have a CAC capable of providing these high-quality services, however, the District must address the longstanding issue of CAC funding. Currently, Safe Shores is primarily funded through government grants and contributions from the Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) and CFSA. In CY23, 78% of their funding came from these two agencies.¹⁶ In FY25, funds from OVSJG amounted to nearly \$1.9 million.¹⁷ Safe Shores is required to reapply for these grant funds annually, a process that requires extensive labor that does not guarantee the same level of funds each year. The funds from CFSA are the only dedicated line item for Safe Shores in the Mayor’s budget, totaling \$1.35 million in FY25. Inexplicably, this

budget line is slashed by the Mayor year after year, completely zeroed out in the proposed FY26 budget. We are grateful to Councilmember Lewis George and the Committee on Facilities for transferring the funds needed to restore this CFSA budget line in the FY26 budget,¹⁸ but a long-term solution is needed.

Safe Shores is in line with recommendations from the NCA¹⁹ that CACs have a minimum of five to seven funding sources.²⁰ They also align with the national picture, wherein 68% of funding for CACs across the country comes from government sources.²¹ The main concern, as demonstrated through the examples of OVSJG and CFSA, is the reliability of government funding. Consistent, guaranteed funding levels would support stability and provide a foundation for growth, allowing Safe Shores to serve more youth and families in the District navigating the impacts of trauma. The government has a responsibility to ensure the financial viability of CACs because they serve to support an essential government function of investigating child abuse. We recommend the Committee work with Safe Shores to identify consistent and sustainable government funding sources.

Conclusion

As noted by Michele Booth Cole, the Executive Director of Safe Shores, in her testimony before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, CACs are urgently needed to ensure children are not retraumatized by the very systems meant to protect them.²² Legislation that strengthens the thorough investigation of harm through the

provision of high-quality services is crucial for creating a world where children are safe.

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

¹ Lisa M. Jones, et al., *Do Children's Advocacy Centers improve families' experiences of child sexual abuse investigations?* Child Abuse & Neglect, (2007), available at:

https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=psych_facpub.

² CAC Coverage Maps, available at: <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/cac-coverage-maps/>.

³ U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, *Forming a Multidisciplinary Team To Investigate Child Abuse*, (2000), available at:

<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/170020.pdf>. "<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/170020.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services, *Multidisciplinary Child Protection Teams: Limiting Victim Trauma and Strengthening Prosecution Cases*, (May 2023), available at:

https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/05-2023/child_protection_teams.html.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Safe Shores "About" Page, available at: <https://www.safeshores.org/about/>.

⁷ NCA's National Standards of Accreditation, available at:

<https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/ncas-standards-for-accredited-members/>.

⁸ COW Full Budget Hearing, YouTube, (June 2025), available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OJUwmArUSo>.

⁹ <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² In DC these are the Metropolitan Police Department and Child and Family Services Agency.

¹³ In DC these are the United States Attorney's Office and the Office of the Attorney General.

¹⁴ Chris Newlin, et al., *Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices*, (September 2015), available at:

<https://www.homestudycrredit.com/courses/contentMED2-2/MED2-Child-Forensic-Interviewing.pdf>.

¹⁵ Introduction of the proposed bill, available at: <https://zacharyparkerward5.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Combined-Child-Abuse-Investigation-Multidisciplinary-Team-Certification-Bill.pdf>.

¹⁶ Safe Shores Tax Form 990 2023, available at: <https://www.safeshores.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2023-DIST8617-Tax>Returns-Tax-Return-2112025-website.pdf>.

¹⁷ OVSJG FY25 Funding Recipients, available at:

https://ovsjg.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ovsjg/page_content/attachments/FY25%20Funding%20Recipients-%20Website.pdf.

¹⁸ Committee on Youth Affairs FY26 Committee Budget Report, available at:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bbd09f3d74562c7f0e4bb10/t/68596a97beb94d7ebdeac6e1/1750690456309/Youth+Affairs_FY26+Budget+Recommendations+and+Report_%28Revised+Draft+6.22.25pm%29.pdf.

¹⁹ <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.

²⁰ Safe Shores Tax Form 990 2023, available at: <https://www.safeshores.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2023-DIST8617-Tax>Returns-Tax-Return-2112025-website.pdf>.

²¹ <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.

²² Michele Booth Cole, Safe Shores Testimony Before the DC Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety Budget Oversight Hearing for the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG), (June 2025), *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/863>.