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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
One Front Door Act of 2025 (B26-277)

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee. My name is Makenna Osborn. I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center and a tenant in the District of Columbia. 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 on the One Front Door Act of 2025.¹ Housing security — having a safe, healthy and stable place to call home — is a key part of the foundation children need to develop and thrive.² Through Children's Law Center's work representing children in foster care³ and families navigating barriers to their children's health and education,⁴ we see first-hand how difficult it is for low-income families in DC to access housing security. The gap between their income and market rent is simply too big⁵ and the resources to help cover that gap — like vouchers and ERAP — are limited.⁶ We also see how housing insecurity harms DC children:

- Children stuck in poor quality rental housing that is making them sick because it is the only option their family can afford;⁷
- Children who miss school and have a harder time learning when they are there because of frequent moves, stress, and food insecurity;⁸ and

- Children who become involved in the child welfare system while their family is struggling to maintain adequate housing.⁹

Recognizing the pervasive issue of housing insecurity among our clients and their communities, Children's Law Center has been compelled to expand our work to advocate for more quality, affordable housing for families in DC. Therefore, we support the One Front Door Act because passing this bill will remove an outdated aspect of the District's building code that inhibits the number and affordability of housing units included in new four to six story multifamily projects.

Allowing Single Stairways in Buildings up to Six Stories Will Increase the Construction of New Affordable, Family-Sized Housing Units in DC

To make meaningful progress in lessening the affordable housing crisis that is affecting so many DC families, the Council and Executive need to act wherever possible to increase the amount and affordability of rental housing in the District. Children's Law Center applauds Councilmembers Nadeau, White, and Pinto for introducing the One Front Door Act to update the District's building code to allow "a single entrance/egress stairway" in multifamily residential buildings up to six stories.¹⁰ By unlocking the potential for more single-stair multifamily buildings, the District can empower developers with the kind of cost-efficiencies and flexibility needed to build more affordable, family-sized units, without sacrificing resident safety.

In DC and most cities in the United States, construction codes require buildings over three stories to have two exit stairwells linked by an interior corridor. While these regulations were initially implemented to address legitimate fire safety concerns, they were created decades ago, before modern advances in sprinkler systems, smoke alarms, and fire-safe materials, and their necessity has been called into question in recent years.¹¹ In fact, studies of fire death rates in cities

that have allowed single-stairway multifamily buildings above three stories have found no evidence of increased safety risks up to at least six stories.¹² Given this evidence and the fact that additional stairways carry additional construction costs and design constraints, it is imperative to reexamine whether it is necessary to maintain the provisions of the District's building code that mandate multiple stairways in new buildings above three stories.

Requiring dual stairways connected by a hallway on each floor rather than allowing one central stairway, increases construction costs by an estimated 6-13%,¹³ limits design flexibility,¹⁴ and reduces rentable floor space.¹⁵ Under DC's current dual-stair regulations, housing developers are 1) incentivized to build smaller units, like studios and one-bedrooms, and charge higher rents to make projects financially viable and 2) discouraged from building small to mid-sized projects because the difference between construction costs and future rental income becomes prohibitively expensive.¹⁶ In contrast, single-stair layouts allow more efficient use of space, lowering per-unit construction costs and enabling the inclusion of larger units (2+ bedrooms) at more attainable rents. Dual-stair requirements also make it especially challenging for nonprofit affordable housing developers to build in high-opportunity neighborhoods with small and irregular lot sizes. As a result, infill sites where single-stair four to six story buildings would be financially feasible remain underutilized across the District and we are missing out on opportunities to deliver more family sized, affordable housing units.¹⁷

Small to mid-sized single stair apartment buildings are a well-established housing type globally and their adoption in cities like Seattle and New York City has demonstrated that, when paired with modern fire safety measures, allowing single-stair buildings up to six stories does not reduce resident safety. The Council should pass the One Front Door Act so the District can

join the many jurisdictions around the country¹⁸ replacing outdated dual stair regulations with more efficient, cost-effective approaches that reflect current technology and meet current housing needs.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. Children’s Law Center greatly appreciates the Council’s commitment to innovative policy reforms like the One Front Door Act to increase affordable housing options across the District. We look forward to continuing to partner on this pressing issue for DC children and families.

¹ B26-0227, *One Front Door Act of 2025*, available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0227>.

² See Sonya Acosta, “Stable Housing is Foundational to Children’s Well-Being,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Feb. 15 2022), available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/stable-housing-is-foundational-to-childrens-well-being>; Megan Sandel et al., “Housing as a Healthcare Investment,” Children’s Health Watch (Mar. 2016), available at: <https://childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/Housing-as-a-Health-Care-Investment.pdf>.

³ Children’s Law Center’s Guardian ad Litem attorneys represent over half of the children in foster care in DC and we work to help families prevent and navigate involvement in the child welfare system. See *Our Impact: Family*, Children’s Law Center, <https://childrenslawcenter.org/our-impact/family/>.

⁴ 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. See *Our Impact: Health*, Children’s Law Center, <https://childrenslawcenter.org/ourimpact/health/>.

⁵ The average monthly income of a single parent in DC working a full-time minimum wage job is \$3,033, which is barely enough to cover the \$2,314 Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in DC and would leave the family almost no money for other expenses like healthcare, transportation, and childcare. See *Out of Reach: District of Columbia State Report*, National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), 2025, available at: <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/dc>. (accessed January 27, 2025).

⁶ According to recent estimates from the Urban Institute, to help every very low income renter household in DC access and maintain housing security, the District would need to invest *an additional* \$380 million/year in deep rental subsidies (like permanent vouchers), \$153 million/year in shallow rental subsidies (like DC Flex), and \$76 million - \$108 million/year (at least in the near term) in emergency rental assistance (ERAP) above current funding levels. Without such investments there are simply not enough resources for the number of families eligible for and in need of assistance. Elizabeht Burton, Leah Hendey, and Peter A. Tatian, *Combating Rising Evictions in the District of Columbia with Housing Subsidies*, Urban Institute (June 2024), available at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Combating_Rising_Evictions_with_Housing_Subsidies_0.pdf.

⁷ Families with very low incomes are more likely to live in physically inadequate rental housing with conditions like mold, rodents, inadequate heating and cooling, and broken appliances that cause and exacerbate childhood asthma and other health risks. See Irene Lew, *Housing Inadequacy Remains a Problem for the Lowest-Income Renters*, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (JCHS) (May 19, 2016), <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/housing-inadequacy-remains-a-problem-for-the-lowest-income-renters>; Chima Anyanwu, Kirsten M.M. Beyer, *Intersections Among Housing, Environmental Conditions, and Health Equity: A Conceptual Model for Environmental Justice Policy*, Social Sciences & Humanities Open, Vol. 9 (2024), available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291124000421#bib92>.

⁸ See Brendan Chen, *How Housing Instability Affects Educational Outcomes*, Urban Institute: Housing Matters (February 28, 2024), <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/how-housing-instability-affects-educational-outcomes>.

⁹ See Amy Dworsky, *Families at the Nexus of Housing and Child Welfare*, First Focus and State Policy Advocacy Reform Center (SPARC) (November 2014), <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Families-at-the-Nexus-of-Housing-and-Child-Welfare.pdf>.

¹⁰ B26-0227, *One Front Door Act of 2025*, available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0227>.

¹¹ Stephen Smith et al., *Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record*, Center for Building in North America and The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 27, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record>; Joe Tedino, *How a Single Stairway Can Take Affordable Housing to a New Level*, Planning Magazine (November 17, 2025), <https://www.planning.org/planning/2025/nov/how-a-single-stairway-can-take-affordable-housing-to-a-new-level/>.

¹² See Stephen Smith et al., *Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record*, Center for Building in North America and The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 27, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record>; *Minnesota Single-Exit Stairway Apartment Building Study*, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (December 30, 2025), https://www.dli.mn.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/Minnesota_Single-Exit_Stairway_Apartment_report.pdf.

¹³ Stephen Smith et al., *Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record*, Center for Building in North America and The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 27, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record> (“Single-stairway four-to-six-story buildings with relatively small floor plates cost 6% to 13% less to construct than similar dual-stairway buildings.”).

¹⁴ See Sean Jursnick and Peter LiFari, *The Single-Stair Solution: A Path to More Affordable, Diverse, and Sustainable Housing*, Mercatus Center (February 19, 2025), p. 2-4, available at: <https://www.mercatus.org/research/policy-briefs/single-stair-solution-path-more-affordable-diverse-and-sustainable-housing>; Stephen Smith et al., *Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record*, Center for Building in North America and The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 27, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record>.

¹⁵ Stephen Smith et al., *Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record*, Center for Building in North America and The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 27, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record> (“The additional stairway and corridor consume around 7% of the building’s floor area.”; “A 2024 study in the Boston area found that dual-stairway buildings have efficiency ratios that are 10 percentage points lower than similarly-sized single-stair buildings.”).

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- ¹⁶ See Sean Jursnick and Peter LiFari, *The Single-Stair Solution: A Path to More Affordable, Diverse, and Sustainable Housing*, Mercatus Center (February 19, 2025), p. 2-4, available at: <https://www.mercatus.org/research/policy-briefs/single-stair-solution-path-more-affordable-diverse-and-sustainable-housing>; Joe Tedino, *How a Single Stairway Can Take Affordable Housing to a New Level*, Planning Magazine (November 17, 2025), <https://www.planning.org/planning/2025/nov/how-a-single-stairway-can-take-affordable-housing-to-a-new-level/>.
- ¹⁷ Julian Frost, *How Single-Stair Apartment Reforms Could Advance Across the Region This Year*, Greater Greater Washington (January 22, 2025), <https://ggwash.org/view/98151/how-single-stair-apartment-reforms-could-advance-across-the-region-this-year> (“The District’s height limit and low-density zoning in neighborhoods outside of Ward 1 and Ward 2 challenges the feasibility of developing infill lots. The legalization of six-story single-stair buildings would bring into play small infill lots that are currently infeasible to develop due to the geometrical constraints of the double-egress rule.”).
- ¹⁸ See George Ashford, Andrew Justus, Alex Armlovich, *Understanding Single-Stair Reform Efforts Across the United States*, Niskanen Center (August 27, 2024), <https://www.niskanencenter.org/understanding-single-stair-reform-efforts-across-the-united-states/> (New York City, Seattle, and Honolulu have allowed single-stair buildings up to six stories for many years.); Chase Hatchett, *States Advance Single-Stairway Reforms to Expand Housing*, The Pew Charitable Trusts (November 4, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2025/11/04/states-advance-single-stairway-reforms-to-expand-housing> (Since 2022, fifteen states have passed legislation allowing some form of single-stair multifamily buildings above three stories).