



250 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 • F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety  
March 18, 2026

Public Hearing:  
B26-0572 – Child Support Improvement Amendment Act of 2026

Jennifer Mezey  
Deputy Director, Healthy Together Medical-Legal Partnership  
Children's Law Center

## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee. My name is Jennifer Mezey. I am the Deputy Director of the Children's Law Center's Healthy Together Medical-Legal Partnership. Prior to coming to Children's Law Center, I worked at Legal Aid DC and the National Women's Law Center where I worked directly on issues of child support. This testimony reflects my previous experiences as well as my current work with 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.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today regarding B26-0572 the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act of 2026. In our Healthy Together program, Children's Law Center staff partner with medical providers who staff pediatric clinics operated by Children's National Hospital, Unity Clinic and Mary's Center. Through this partnership, our lawyers address health-harming legal needs in the areas of income

security, housing, and education in an effort to produce better health outcomes for the District's poorest children. In 2025, the Healthy Together program helped 4,800 children and families increase access to safe, healthy housing; critical educational supports; essential health services; and economic assistance.

Many of the families we serve through the Healthy Together program receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – last year, over 600 families (or half of all the families reporting income during intake) served by the Healthy Together program received TANF. We see directly how TANF helps support these families' access to housing, food, and transportation, preserving some small measure of economic stability.

Having available cash provides power, flexibility, and greater stability, especially during uncertain economic times. Thus, ensuring cash more easily flows to families would provide further stability for the families we serve and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we support the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act of 2026.

### **The Child Support Improvement Amendment Act Ensures Child Support Is Used to Meet the Basic Needs of Children**

The District's TANF system currently runs under a "cost recovery model."<sup>2</sup> A family who receives TANF benefits must sign over the right to receive monthly child support payments to the District government and cooperate with the District's efforts to establish and enforce support orders (unless the family has good cause for failure to cooperate).<sup>3</sup> Using flexibility in federal law that allows states to pass through some of the

collected support to families, the District currently allows families to receive \$200 per month of collected current support (which is then disregarded in the calculation of their eligibility for and amount of) TANF benefits.<sup>4</sup> The rest of the support collected is split between the District and the federal government, with half of the funds going to the District's child support collection operations and the other going to the federal Treasury.

The cost recovery model assumes that "cash assistance benefits are a stand-in for support from noncustodial parents, and the state should reimburse itself from support paid by noncustodial parents."<sup>5</sup> This model is based on a long history of "prescriptive, coercive, and punitive public assistance policies that have disproportionately harmed Black families."<sup>6</sup>

Enactment of the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act would move the District closer to a model that centers child and family well-being rather than cost recovery. Once fully implemented,<sup>7</sup> the District will pass through all collected child support to families currently receiving TANF. This means that when a non-custodial parent complies with a child support order, the payments will go directly to their children, and not to the District and federal governments. Studies have shown that policies such as this that provide more resources for families through TANF and child support can improve child well-being and developmental outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, under this policy, child support is not a replacement for monthly TANF payments, but instead a supplement for TANF families to further support the cost of

raising a child in the District.<sup>9</sup> First, not all TANF families have child support collected on their behalf – a University of Maryland study found in 2021 that only 40 percent of TANF families with a child support order received a pass-through payment every month.<sup>10</sup> A family receiving both TANF and pass-through child support *will still only* have income that is significantly below the federal poverty line.<sup>11</sup> However, the family receiving the pass-through will have some additional money for rent, food, clothing and other necessities that will lead to better outcomes for their children.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, passing the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act would not eliminate the imperative to prevent the upcoming cuts to TANF in Fiscal Year (FY) 2027. Even with an increase in the amount and consistency of child support payments, it is unlikely that increased support payments would be able to offset TANF cuts, given that the non-custodial parents of TANF recipients are also likely to be low-income and therefore the child support payments will still be limited. Further, even if increased support payments could offset TANF cuts – which again is unlikely – these increased payments would not go to families until at least FY 2029, while TANF cuts will be immediately imposed in FY 2027. Finally, as stated above, not all families on TANF would receive child support, so child support passthroughs would not offset TANF cuts across all families. Creating a system in which child support goes directly to the family that the support is intended for—rather than fund government enforcement actions—will help families, but the District must also reverse the TANF cuts to preserve the safety net.

Since last fall, the Children’s Law Center, as a member of the TANF is Still a Lifeline Coalition, has fought to “preserve and bolster DC’s TANF program,” as a critical cash assistance program for the District’s poorest children and families.<sup>13</sup> Our support for the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act complements our TANF advocacy by creating opportunities to establish additional economic supports for these same families. Through the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act, the District will be investing in systemic policies and technological upgrades that will, when fully implemented, result in additional child support funds flowing to families who also receive TANF.<sup>14</sup> We, therefore, ask this Committee to swiftly pass the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act. We also ask the full Council to work together to reverse the cuts to TANF in FY2027.<sup>15</sup> Taken together these actions will continue to move the District forward in strengthening economic safety for DC residents.

**Additional Provisions Would Provide Additional Funds for Families and Further Improve Child and Family Well-Being.**

We urge the Council to adopt the Child Support Improvement Act and ask that the Council consider additional provisions to strengthen the legislation. The proposed changes include:

- Reorder payments from tax refunds so that any collected funds go first to pay off a family’s current support order, then debt owed to the family, and any remaining funds goes to the District government.

- Amend the legislation to include further opportunities for a good cause exemption that would remove the requirement that a noncustodial parent pay child support in order for the custodial parent to receive TANF.
- Add automatic suspension of child support orders for incarcerated parents.
- Remove the ability to suspend a non-custodial parent's driver's license when the parent accumulates two months' worth of child support debt.

These additional provisions to the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act will improve the District's child support system by making it fairer and more effective – improvements that are long overdue.

Finally, we ask this Committee and the Committee on Human Services to monitor the implementation of the Child Support Improvement Amendment Act. Some of the greatest impact of these changes, including the 100 percent pass through of child support to TANF families cannot go through until after the updates to Child Support Services Division's (CSSD) computers. We ask this Committee to monitor CSSD's updates and ensure they are done timely and effectively so this legislation may be fully realized. We also note that the funding for this legislation is minimal, especially in the first five years and mostly relies on capital dollars to support CSSD's computer updates. However, monitoring the continued funding needs is critical to ensure that the investments made now are able to be fully realized down the line. Ensuring the success of this legislation does not stop at its passage but requires continued ongoing implementation monitoring.

We encourage this Committee to work with the relevant agencies to ensure efficient and effective monitoring of the Child Support Improvement Act.

## Conclusion

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

---

<sup>1</sup> Council of Community Pediatrics, *Poverty and Child Health in the United States*, American Academy of Pediatric Policy Statement (April 1, 2016) (reaffirmed April 2021), available at: <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/137/4/e20160339/81482/Poverty-and-Child-Health-in-the-United-States?autologincheck=redirected>; Vicky Turetsky and Diana Azevedo-McCaffrey, *Directing Child Support Payments to Families, Not Government, Would Help Families Afford Basic Needs and Thrive*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, (Oct. 8, 2024), available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/directing-child-support-payments-to-families-not-government-would-help>.

<sup>2</sup> See Turetsky and Azevedo-McCaffrey, *supra* note 2.

<sup>3</sup> D.C. Code §§ 4-205.19 (b)-(c), 4-217.07(2) (requirement to assign rights to child support); D.C. Code § 4-217.08 (child support cooperation requirement); D.C. Code § 4-217.09 (providing for good cause for failure to cooperate).

<sup>4</sup> D.C. Code § 4-205.19 (c)(5)

<sup>5</sup> Turetsky and Azevedo-McCaffrey, *supra* note 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> Per reporting from Court Social Services Division, in order to implement this provision, the District's child support agency needs to reprogram its computers, which will take an estimated three years.

<sup>8</sup> Turetsky and Azevedo-McCaffrey, *supra* note 2; Carrie Masten, Joan Lombardi and Philip Fisher, *Helping Families Meet Basic Needs Enables Parents to Promote Children's Healthy Growth*, Development, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Oct. 28, 2021), available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/helping-families-meet-basic-needs-enables-parents-to-promote>; Maria Cancian, et. al., *Welfare and Child Support: Complements, Not Substitutes*, (2008), available at:

[https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~gwallace/Papers/Cancian,%20Meyer,%20and%20Caspar%20\(2008\).pdf](https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~gwallace/Papers/Cancian,%20Meyer,%20and%20Caspar%20(2008).pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Many TANF families do work, however, economic realities – low job growth, high unemployment, and rising costs – are making it difficult for families to maintain consistent income.

---

<sup>10</sup> Haley Smith and Lauren A. Hall, *Maryland's Child Support Pass-through Policy: Exploring Impacts on TCA Families*, School of Social Work, University of Maryland, (October 2021), available at: <https://familywelfare.umaryland.edu/reportsearch/content/reports/welfare/Pass-Through-Impacts-on-TCA-Families.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> For example, if a family of three will receive at max \$803 dollars per month. If the same family now receives a pass-through of \$200 in child support, that same family will now have \$1003 – which is still 44 percent below the federal poverty line (as opposed to 35 percent on just TANF). \$1003 a month would not cover all the expenses that are required for raising a child – housing, child care, food, clothing, etc. While a pass-through is additional money it is not sufficient to subsidize any cuts to TANF. See Department of Human Services, TANF, available at: <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/temporary-cash-assistance-needy-families-tanf>.

<sup>12</sup> Under the Mayor's TANF proposal, a family of three with no other income could have their income reduced to as little as \$151 per month. Even \$200 per month of passed through support would still leave the family at 15 percent of the poverty level. See TANF is Still a Lifeline Coalition, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/our-impact/systemic-reform/tanf-is-still-a-lifeline/>. Department of Human Services is reporting these numbers to the Coalition members – we have documented them on the webpage.

<sup>13</sup> Our advocacy has focused around stopping the District from imposing inflexible time limits and harsh sanctions that will deprive more than 15,000 of the District's poorest children of income, as well as reinstating the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) increase that allows benefits to keep up with inflation. See TANF is Still a Lifeline Coalition, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/our-impact/systemic-reform/tanf-is-still-a-lifeline/>.

<sup>14</sup> Beginning in FY2027, the cuts to TANF include: (1) End cost-of-living adjustments for TANF benefits; (2) Reinststitute time limits for families receiving TANF for 60 months or more; and (3) Increase sanctions for not meeting work readiness requirements. See Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Support Act of 2025. SUBTITLE G. TANF BENEFITS.

<sup>15</sup> Makenna Osborn, Children's Law Center Testimony before DC Council Committee on Human Services, (February 26, 2026), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2025-26-performance-oversight-hearing-department-of-human-services/>.