

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)

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Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, my name is Kathy Zeisel and I am a Ward 7 resident and the Director of Special Legal Projects at Children's Law Center and a Commissioner on the Access to Justice Commission. 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 giving me the opportunity to provide testimony to highlight the significant impact of the DC Bar Foundation funding provided through the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG). Before I get into the details of the many ways that this funding allows Children's Law Center to work in the DC community, I want to thank the Council for ensuring the funding remained level last year. This funding is the cornerstone of legal services in DC, and once again allowed DC to leverage public funds to ensure that DC residents can access vital city services, live healthier lives, escape from domestic violence, create stable families for children and

protects the housing of thousands of DC residents each year by preventing them from being evicted.

Children's Law Center is a recipient for many years of the Access to Justice ("ATJ") and Civil Legal Counsel Project Program ("CLCPP") funds to support our work. At Children's Law Center, the ATJ grant helps Children's Law Center ensure that all children have a stable family, good health, and a quality education.

### **Ensuring Children Have Good Health**

The ATJ and CLCPP grants partially fund our medical legal partnership work. Medical legal partnerships are an innovative collaboration that places attorneys in community pediatric primary care settings as part of the treatment team working to identify and prevent health harming legal needs. Our Healthy Together medical-legal partnership started in 2002 with Children's National, and has grown to five Children's National sites, two Unity Health Care sites, and Mary's Center. We are also now partnered with Mamototo Village with a focus on ensuring family stability. Last year, we received over 2000 new referrals and handled over 500 cases, worked with hundreds of pro bono attorneys, with over 50% of our clients coming from wards 7 and 8. We also use these grants to train our medical partners, parents and caregivers, and community members.

I want to share with you some examples of how our work specifically helps DC residents to access lawyers in to get healthier and more secure homes, promote stable

families, and increase access to quality education. We provide legal services across many areas of law, including housing conditions, access to healthcare, family law, public benefits, education, and assisted decision-making, but I will focus on a few of our most common today.

Our CLCPP funding allows us to advocate for families whose health is being impacted by the housing conditions they live in, most often where the landlord's failure to repair mold or to properly exterminate for mice, rats, and roaches leads to a child's asthma being exacerbated in the home even when they are taking all of their asthma medications. Often, the severity of the conditions means that the child's health conditions are exacerbated—meaning that the family is spending time at the hospital and doctor's office, and out of school and work. This compromises their ability have stable income, and stable housing. Here is the story of one such family that we worked with. The Sullivan<sup>1</sup> family is incredibly close. No matter the challenges, they lean on each other and figure out what's next. But in 2024, they faced a crisis. Four-year-old Christian and 17-year-old Luna both had asthma that was made worse by mold in their apartment, and conditions were getting worse.

They lived in an apartment through DC's Rapid Re-Housing program. Their mom, Ms. Sullivan, was working hard to find a more stable, long-term solution while taking care of the children and also caring for her own elderly mother. But she kept

having to focus instead on fighting for the property manager and landlord to respond to her many requests for help.

Water was leaking in through cracks in the walls and ceilings – leading to significant water damage and mold growth. The faulty HVAC system and dishwasher both made things worse – spiking the humidity levels in the apartment consistently up to 75%.

“It felt like living in a rainforest,” Ms. Sullivan said. “My son’s asthma attacks got so bad that he couldn’t go to school, he was missing so much and there was so much he couldn’t participate in.”

Ms. Sullivan got the property manager to make some repairs and started home-schooling Christian around his breathing treatment schedule, but the humidity and the mold kept coming back. Christian was constantly coughing and wheezing and in need of urgent care.

Ms. Sullivan asked Christian’s pediatrician at Unity Health Care if there was anyone who could help get their housing conditions fixed. The doctor connected her with Children’s Law Center.

Initially, the property manager promised to act and scheduled mold remediation. But the maintenance team just painted over much of the mold instead of replacing the damaged areas. It became clear that the property manager would not address the real issue – water leaks coming from other parts of the building.

Children's Law Center activated multiple paths to get the Sullivan family into healthier housing: We explored getting an emergency transfer to a new unit, tried to expedite switching to a long-term rental support program that would provide more stability for the family, and – while waiting on the results of those actions – we worked to compel the landlord to make the current unit as habitable as possible.

We sent a demand letter to the landlord identifying the many housing code violations they were required by law to fix. When the landlord failed to respond, we took them to court. The court forced the landlord to act, and over the summer of 2025 the landlord made significant repairs in the unit – including mold remediation that significantly reduced the amount of mold in the apartment and repairs to the utilities most affecting the humidity.

The family is all breathing better now. Christian's having fewer asthma attacks and needing fewer treatments – so much so that he'll be able to start a new schedule that's half in-school and half home-school.

The repairs this summer bought the Sullivan family some much-needed time to secure long-term housing. They'll be moving into their new home at the start of the new year.

"It is a long process," Ms. Sullivan said, "but trust the process. I'm glad I had someone there who would advocate for me, someone to talk to and to vent to when no one else was listening."

This case is just one of many where stabilizing the housing conditions helped to ensure that a child could have a stable education, and gave the family the opportunity to get more stable housing.

And, we use the data we get from our cases to better understand how to serve our clients. Over the past several years, we worked with Children's National Hospital to map where children with asthma live in DC, where our housing conditions cases, and where other housing conditions complaints are in DC to create an interactive map of asthma housing conditions in DC.<sup>ii</sup> This map is driving important housing conditions work in DC, including whole building housing conditions work where we try to preserve affordable healthy housing through improving housing conditions at an entire property.

Through our Evaluation and Learning team, we know that our work in getting remediation done in homes stops children from going to the emergency room for their asthma, and saves Medicaid money. We also know that stabilizing children with permanent homes and getting them the education they need has long term positive effects for them, and long-term cost savings for DC.<sup>iii</sup>

In 2025, we collaborated with partners to do extensive work to keep water on in multifamily housing where the owner failed to pay the water bill for the property, often for many years, and DC Water threatened to shut off the water. CLC kept the water on at 17 properties ourselves, and collaborated with Legal Aid and DC OAG to keep the

water on at many more. We also collaborated with many other legal services organizations, organizers, government agencies, the Council, and DC Water itself, to try to find solutions to keep water on for blameless tenants where their landlord failed to the water bill.

In addition to this work, we leveraged our years of knowledge about making individual apartments healthier and utilized our data work to do whole building housing conditions work. We are working to improve conditions for whole buildings of tenants and to leave them with better policies and practices going forward so that the conditions remain better after we leave the case. Our goal is to preserve affordable housing that is healthy and safe for DC residents.

### **Stable Families**

The ATJ grant also funds some of our Families Together work, a program which provides legal assistance to parents and caregivers to stabilize their children's lives and create supportive environments. Attorneys both assist caregivers in some custody cases or act as Guardians ad Litem in other complex custody cases to ensure that children have a safe and stable home. By providing long-term, stable homes for these children, we are helping to prevent trauma and provide a pathway for long-term success.

### **Quality Education**

Through both Healthy Together and Families Together, Children's Law Center ensures that children referred by medical partners have a quality education. Our

partners send us families where they identify a child is missing a critical service or where the child is not progressing meaningfully at school. Our lawyers help make sure kids get the school supports that they need so they can start succeeding in school, and so their parents can stop coming to school regularly for behavioral meetings and often can return to work themselves. For some children, they need a lawyer to even get evaluations from the school, and at CLC, we make sure that parents have the knowledge they need to continue advocating even after we are no longer their attorneys. Let me tell you about one of our cases from last year. Danny<sup>iv</sup> is a sweet seven-year-old who loves his friends and Sonic the Hedgehog, but he had difficulties at school from the start. His mother, Ms. Vasquez, worked with his school and pediatrician to understand his needs. He was diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD when he was in kindergarten and Ms. Vasquez made sure he had a 504 plan with his school to get the right support going into first grade.

Despite her efforts, his school failed to follow the plan they'd established. They addressed behavioral issues, but not his educational needs. Ms. Vasquez feared they would keep passing Danny without actual educational progress.

We worked with Ms. Vasquez and the school to get new evaluations for her son and together built an IEP that better addressed his needs. Ms. Vasquez credits her Children's Law Center attorney with getting the school to take Danny's needs seriously and helping raise her confidence in her own advocacy for her son.

"This is serious, doesn't matter what side of town I live on. I am not to be played with regarding my child," Ms. Vasquez said. "Thanks to Children's Law Center, I have that boost – I have the confidence I have now in the power I have as his mother."

And we do all of this work to ensure safe and stable families because the DC Bar Foundation, using the money provided by the Council, sees the value in our work and understands how we help DC families access justice.

We are just one program funded by the DC Bar Foundation working to help DC residents access justice in a myriad of ways. All of this is to say that the money that the Council provides to the DC Bar Foundation through the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants for the Access to Justice and CLCPCC grants is critically important. It changes the lives of the residents of DC for the better, and as a grantee we thank the Council for continuing this funding.

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<sup>i</sup> Children's Law Center works to protect the privacy of our clients. The names have been changed at the request of the family.

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ii [IMPACT DC's Healthy Housing Map | Children's National Hospital](#)

iii We have a unique contract with AmeriHealth that is the result of research led by our Evaluation and Learning team. Our team has been able to look at whether our housing conditions interventions work for children with asthma, specifically whether when we get the housing conditions fixed through a legal intervention, does the child have fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations in the two years after our intervention than in the year prior to it.<sup>3</sup> The short answer is that yes, when we improved housing conditions, the child's asthma symptoms improved. When we thought about in terms of saving Medicaid dollars, we were able to show that for the average child we worked with, at 18 months there were over \$10,000 in decreased expenditures. For the top 10% of the children with asthma in our client population, there was a Medicaid savings average of over \$40,000. In other words, by putting a small amount of dollars into the legal intervention, we saved money in other systems. This does not account for the days of school the child was able to attend, the job the parent could keep, the apartment they were able to pay rent for, the decreased stress in their lives, and more.

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