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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)

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, my name is Kathy Zeisel. I am a DC 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.

This is the most challenging budget in my nearly 18 years at 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, including legal services. We want to thank the Council for creating the ATJ program and for funding it each year for the past 20 years. Yet, we all know that even at the 2025 funding levels, the demand for legal services in DC far exceeded what the legal services community could provide. The cuts proposed in this budget would devastate legal services in DC and deprive many DC residents of any hope of accessing meaningful

justice in DC. These cuts would leave domestic violence victims alone to face their abusers, children in moldy and mouse-infested housing, DC residents in medical debt, and would prevent many DC residents from obtaining federal benefits which they could otherwise obtain.

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 and restore the cuts made by the mayor, which represent staff serving DC residents at their most vulnerable times.

At Children's Law Center, these funds support our innovative medical-legal partnership, Healthy Together and our family stabilization and permanency program, Families Together. Last year, we reached over 3700 children and families and trained 1500 pediatricians, other medical staff, and community members with the ATJ and CLCPP funds.

Our medical legal partnerships work with Children's National, Mary's Center, Unity Healthcare, Mamatoto Village, and as of June, Community of Hope to improve the lives of DC children facing non-medical barriers to health by putting lawyers in the community. 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, untangling the mess of red tape at DC agencies that lead to our clients having even greater costs to the system if we do not fix the immediate problem, obtaining federal 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, avoiding \$14.1 million in Medicaid costs in the last three years. 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.

We have numerous examples of families we helped through our medical legal partnership who consented to share their stories with the Council. Here are just a few, and additional longer stories are attached. We helped Ms. M get her young autistic son who is mostly non-verbal into a new school when his old school wouldn't work with Ms. M on a safety plan after her son was injured in the classroom. We worked with the new school on getting the right services for him, and he's made significant progress.

We helped Ms. V and her young children were often forced to sleep outside because the conditions in their public housing apartment threatened the children's health – and Ms. V had been told she might lose access to public housing if she moved

them to a shelter. Together, we were able to untangle the administrative error that had prevented them from receiving an emergency transfer and got the family into a new home.

We also helped Ms. R get lasting repairs after plumbing issues in the building flooded her apartment twice and left water damage and mold that exacerbated her daughters' chronic asthma.

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 healthy housing for even more DC residents.

Our ATJ funding also supports our work as custody 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. Even if parents aren't certain they need a lawyer, our attorneys are able to listen to their concerns, walk them through legal processes and give them a road map when the future is daunting and uncertain. With that expertise and reassurance in hand - knowing they have someone they can call going forward - parents can focus on stability for their child.

To share some specific ways we did this, last year, we helped ensure Ms. K could enroll her grandson in school and take him to the doctor without putting the family

through a potentially contentious guardianship proceeding, thereby allowing his biological mother to remain a presence in his life.

We also helped two aunts get joint custody of their nephews after the boys' mother was tragically murdered, trying to make the legal process as smooth as possible so they could focus on providing love and support to their nephews.

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.

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 over 3,700 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 including accessing federal supplemental security income, 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

The Smiths: Ms. Smith* visited Mamatoto Village with her baby in early 2025. Her daughter was healthy, but they were experiencing homelessness. They were sleeping on a family member’s couch – and since Ms. Smith wasn’t on the lease, the longer they stayed, the higher the risk was that everyone who lived there could be evicted.

Ms. Smith was doing everything she could to get stable housing for her daughter. She had initially secured a year-long housing voucher and found an apartment – but then was rejected for the unit when the agency mistakenly reported the voucher would only last a few months.

At Mamatoto Village, Ms. Smith was connected with a Children’s Law Center lawyer. Over the next few weeks, they were able to escalate the issue and successfully advocate for the agency to honor the twelve-month voucher originally promised. Ms. Smith and her baby girl moved into their own unit. It was exactly the restart she needed so she could focus on her daughter’s crucial early development without the constant threat of eviction or homelessness.



*Children’s Law Center works hard to protect our clients’ confidentiality. Names and certain identifying details have been changed, and stock photos have been used, but all other details are true.

Ms. Vasquez and Danny: Danny* 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.

"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," Ms. Vasquez said.

The Sullivan Family: Four-year-old Christian* and 17-year-old Luna had asthma that was made worse by conditions in their home, an apartment they found through DC's Rapid Re-Housing program. Water leaks led to significant damage and mold growth. The faulty HVAC system and dishwasher made things worse – spiking humidity to 75%.

"It felt like living in a rainforest," said Christian's mom, Ms. Sullivan. "My son's asthma attacks got so bad that he couldn't go to school, he was missing so much." Ms. Sullivan had to home-school Christian around his breathing treatment schedule.

While she fought for the landlord to respond to her many requests, only minor fixes were made. The humidity and mold kept coming back. Christian's pediatrician connected them with Children's Law Center and we activated multiple paths: exploring an emergency transfer to a new unit, expediting a switch to long-term rental support and using the legal process to compel the landlord to make fixes to their current home.

Thankfully, the court ordered the landlord to make repairs. Christian started having fewer asthma attacks, needed fewer treatments – and was finally able to go back to school. The repairs also gave the Sullivans time to secure long-term housing and move into their new home.

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