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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Youth Affairs
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Budget Oversight Hearing
Child and Family Services Agency

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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 the 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 citywide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Child and Family Services Agency's (CFSA) proposed FY27 budget. We testified last fall in support of the Child Abuse Investigation Multidisciplinary Team Certification Amendment Act of 2025, with some key recommendations for how to strengthen the intent of the legislation.¹ We spoke to the importance of Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) neutrality and the need to clarify that DC's MDT must include a CAC rather than just requiring an effort to be made to include them. We urge the Committee to continue working with Safe Shores to craft legislation that solidifies the essential role of CACs and does not undermine their functionality.

This budget cycle, Safe Shores is again left without funding in CFSA's budget, because funding has historically been provided through one-time enhancements. Repeated uncertainty in funding leads to instability in the program which ultimately weakens the support available to children and families navigating the effects of abuse. In today's testimony, I will focus on the need to develop sustainable funding for DC's CAC. The critical role CACs play in supporting child abuse investigations makes it necessary to ensure long-term financial viability. When youth experience abuse and its traumatic effects, they deserve to seek justice and healing in a supportive environment. CACs are designed to fulfill this purpose, thus should be a funding priority, particularly when the District is seeing disinvestment in youth well-being in other sectors, mainly behavioral health. We ask the Committee to at minimum provide another \$1.35 million one-time enhancement for Safe Shores while also pursuing stable, consistent funding for the program for future budget cycles.

CACs Support a Core Government Function – Investigating Child Abuse

It has seemed that one of the barriers to establishing sustainable funding for DC's CAC is a disconnect in understanding the CAC model. 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."ⁱⁱ 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. If the same logic is driving the lack of funding for Safe Shores in CFSA's FY27 budget, the Committee should take heed of the research supporting the value of CAC independence and neutrality. Nationally, over three-quarters of CACs are structured as nonprofits.ⁱⁱⁱ Only 14% are government run and just 3% are operated by child welfare service agencies.^{iv} 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 investigators^v and prosecutors^{vi} without feeling beholden to any specific agency priorities.

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. Neutrality protects the integrity of the forensic interview^{vii} 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.

CACs typically operate within law enforcement jurisdictional boundaries, coordinating with the identified investigatory and prosecutorial bodies. For the sake of

efficiency and stable teaming dynamics, there is only one CAC per MDT. So, supporting Safe Shores is not an act of favoring a particular business, and because Safe Shores is not a contractor of DC government, there is no concern for giving advantages over other organizations that could hypothetically fill the role. DC law requires child abuse to be investigated using the MDT model,^{viii} so providing stability to the CAC is part of ensuring MDT investigations operate effectively in accordance with the law.

Safe Shores Needs Stable, Sustainable Funding

To ensure that DC continues to have a CAC capable of providing high-quality services, 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 Calendar Year 2023, 78% of their funding came from these two agencies.^{ix} In FY25, funds from OVSJG amounted to nearly \$1.9 million.^x 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 other portion of government funding has been a series of one-time enhancements in CFSA's budget, with last year's enhancement totaling \$1.35 million. This means of funding is not sufficient, because every year there has to be a push to get another enhancement.

For the FY26 budget Councilmember Lewis George and the Committee on Facilities were able to transfer the funds needed to provide another one-time

enhancement,^{xi} but a long-term solution is needed. The CAC's essential role in fulfilling DC's legal obligation to investigate child abuse using the MDT model warrants a continuous, dedicated budget line.

Safe Shores' funding structure is in line with recommendations from the NCA^{xii} that CACs have a minimum of five to seven funding sources.^{xiii} It also aligns with the national picture, wherein 68% of funding for CACs across the country comes from government sources.^{xiv} 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 urge the Committee to restore the \$1.35 million enhancement to fund Safe Shores and recommend working with Safe Shores to identify consistent and sustainable government funding sources.

Conclusion

CACs are essential in preventing retraumatization when children and families are navigating the effects of abuse and seeking justice through the complex legal system. Investing in the sustainability of DC's CAC let's those who have been harmed

know that help will remain available. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions you may have.

ⁱ Chris Gamble, Children’s Law Center Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs, (November 19, 2025), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-child-abuse-investigation-multidisciplinary-team-certification-amendment-act-of-2025/>.

ⁱⁱ COW Full Budget Hearing, YouTube, (June 2025), *available at*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OJUwmArUSo>.

ⁱⁱⁱ ADVOCACY, EFFICACY, AND FUNDING IN CACS 2017 Snapshot, *available at*: <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.

^{iv} *Id.*

^v In DC this these are the Metropolitan Police Department and Child and Family Services Agency.

^{vi} In DC these are the United States Attorney’s Office and the Office of the Attorney General.

^{vii} Forensic interviewers are “neutral professional[s] utilizing research and practice-informed techniques.” 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>.

^{viii} DC Code § 4–1301.51 Mandatory investigation of child abuse and neglect cases by multidisciplinary team, *available at*: <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/code/sections/4-1301.51>.

^{ix} This data comes from a tax form that covers the calendar year instead of the fiscal year. Safe Shores Tax Form 990 2023, *available at*: <https://www.safeshores.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/03/2023-DIST8617-Tax>Returns-Tax-Return-2112025-website.pdf>.

^x OVSJG FY25 Funding Recipients, *available at*: https://ovsjg.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ovsjg/page_content/attachments/FY25%20Funding%20Recipients-%20Website.pdf.

^{xi} 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.

^{xii} ADVOCACY, EFFICACY, AND FUNDING IN CACS 2017 Snapshot, *available at*: <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.

^{xiii} Safe Shores Tax Form 990 2023, *available at*: <https://www.safeshores.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/03/2023-DIST8617-Tax>Returns-Tax-Return-2112025-website.pdf>.

^{xiv} ADVOCACY, EFFICACY, AND FUNDING IN CACS 2017 Snapshot, *available at*: <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Snapshot-2017.pdf>.