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Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Human Services  
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Exemption of Domestic Violence Survivors  
from TANF Time Limit Public Roundtable

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Good morning Chairman Graham. My name is Lauren Onkeles-Klein. I am a Senior Supervising Attorney for Children's Law Center (CLC)<sup>1</sup> and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we provide services to more than 2,000 low income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs. Many of these children are living in homes that are currently receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through the Department of Human Services (DHS).

Before specifically addressing the time limit exemption for domestic violence victims, I want to thank you for your leadership in securing time limit exemptions. By passing an exemption bill and then finding funding to cover a number of those exemptions, your work has directly provided an added measure of security to thousands of children and families.

The barriers faced by families living in poverty in the District are enormous. The impact of these barriers, and the stress and trauma that accompany them, are very real. Everyone at this Roundtable has likely heard CLC staff emphasizing the devastating impact traumatic events can have on a child. Unfortunately, those effects are not only devastating in the moment; traumatic events can impact a child for the rest of his or her life.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for children in families relying on TANF, poverty itself can be a traumatic event, leading to other traumatizing outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Children in families whose only source of income is TANF are at almost devastating levels of poverty.<sup>4</sup> When compounded by other traumas like domestic violence, the negative impact on a child and family can reverberate throughout the community. Victims of domestic violence need time to recover from the crime, get treatment for themselves and their children, and in many cases find stable housing. It is for that reason that victims of domestic violence who are seeking assistance and treatment to address the effects of the violence are exempt from work requirements. The work activity exemption is recognition that what these parents are doing to get themselves and their family physically safe and emotionally well is crucially important to their overall capacity to achieve long-term self-sufficiency.

It is for this reason that a majority of states provide flexibility on TANF timelines for families who are confronting or who are recovering from domestic violence,<sup>5</sup> and it is why we support maintaining funding for TANF exemptions for victims of domestic violence.

I remember a woman I worked with, who I will call Sarah. She had escaped an abusive relationship and was staying with her son in a shelter for survivors. Though she was taking part in as much therapy as possible, she was unable to leave the shelter for almost anything, let alone take advantage of work or job training programs, because

her abuser was looking for her. To penalize both her and her child for being unable to look for work during a time when she was doing everything in her power to keep them safe would have turned TANF's mandate to support families toward self-sufficiency on its head.

We are asking that the council maintain funding for and access to a TANF time limit exemption for victims of domestic violence. Exemptions are crucial ways to stop the clock from running while a survivor is recovering and seeking services, regardless of how long she had been receiving TANF support when the violence occurs. Ensuring that these months do not count toward the lifetime benefit limit means that we as a city are not compounding the damage the abuse has caused this family.<sup>6</sup>

The legislation was well crafted to ensure it helps the families that need the exemption. A person's status as the victim of domestic violence must be verified by a contractor or by DHS staff. The law requires also that the head of household must already be receiving supportive services and/or counseling for the abuse and must have been recommended for a TANF work requirement and/or a child support cooperation waiver as a condition of qualification.

We urge the council to maintain the funding for the TANF timeline exemption for victims of domestic violence at a time when the law recognizes that they are unable to engage in work activities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 80-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve over 2,000 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city’s laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit [www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org).

<sup>2</sup> See, In Brief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development; Harvard University Center on the Developing Child;

[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief\\_series/inbrief\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_early\\_adversity](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_the_impact_of_early_adversity) (an overview of research discussing the impact of stress and significant early adversity in areas like poverty and exposure to violence, on developing brains). See also, Melchior M, Moffitt TE, Milne BJ, Poulton R, Caspi A. Why do children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families suffer from poor health when they reach adulthood? A life course study. *Am J Epidemiol.* 2007;166(8):966-974. See also, Duncan GJ, Ziol-Guest KM, Kalil A. Early-childhood poverty and adult attainment, behavior, and health. *Child Dev.* 2010;81(1):306-325.

<sup>3</sup> See, Collins, K., Connors, K., Donohue, A., Gardner, S., Goldblatt, E., Hayward, A., Kiser, L., Strieder, F., Thompson, E. (2010). Understanding the impact of trauma and urban poverty on family systems: Risks, resilience, and interventions. Baltimore, MD: Family Informed Trauma Treatment Center.

[http://nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr\\_rsch\\_prod\\_ar](http://nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_rsch_prod_ar) or <http://fittcenter.umaryland.edu/WhitePaper.aspx>. Additionally, the National Institutes of Health has funded a research study that suggests “stress hormones inhibit brain function and stifle achievement,” see, Stresses of Poverty May Impair Learning Ability in Young Children. Press Release, August 28, 2012 at <http://www.nih.gov/news/health/aug2012/nichd-28.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> A family of three receiving full TANF benefits will receive \$428 per month, or \$5,136 a year. The federal poverty guideline defines poverty as for a family of three as less than \$19,530 a year. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/13poverty.cfm#guidelines>.

<sup>5</sup> See, Welfare Rules Database, TANF Policy Tables by Year, Table IV.C.3, and Table IV.C.4 at <http://anfdata.urban.org/wrd/tables.cfm>.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the above-referenced studies relating to poverty and trauma and how they impact children and families, the largest and most comprehensive study regarding the link between TANF sanctions and negative outcomes for families regarding child maltreatment reviewed data from all states from 1990-1998: Christina Paxson & Jane Waldfogel, Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003). Two other studies (of Michigan and Illinois) found a link between family sanctions and increased contact with child protective services or the increased odds of having a child maltreatment allegation. Although one study (Milwaukee) found no link between family sanctions and child welfare involvement. West Coast Poverty Center, Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet, 37 (2006). Also see the direct link in DC between the housing instability that can be caused by cuts to benefits and involvement in the abuse and neglect system at Government of the District of Columbia, Child and Family Services Agency, Implementing the Adoption and Safe Families Amendment Act of 2000 in the District of Columbia (2009 Annual Report), 31.