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**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services
November 19, 2012**

**Grandparent Caregivers Program Amendment Act of 2012
Bill 19-1000**

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Policy Director
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Good afternoon, Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Sharra E. Greer, the Policy Director of Children's Law Center (CLC),¹ the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District of Columbia and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, CLC serves more than 2,000 low-income children and families, including 500 children in foster care, dozens of children at risk of entering foster care, and several hundred foster parents and relatives of children in foster care.

Children's Law Center supports the proposed expansion of the grandparent caregiver subsidy. We have long championed the grandparent caregiver subsidy program: it is a well-run program that fills a critical need. The proposed expansion of the program will allow it to serve additional children who are at especially high risk and will also help to narrow the front door of entry into the child welfare system.

By waiving the requirement that a child must have been in his or her grandparent's² care for the previous six months in order to qualify for the subsidy, this bill will allow many children at risk of entry into foster care to remain in the care of family members rather than suffering the trauma of being removed from home and placed in foster care with strangers. In our experience, grandparents are often eager to take grandchildren into their homes when their parents cannot care for them, but many grandparents are on a fixed income and lack the financial resources necessary to feed, clothe, and house their grandchildren. When grandparents don't have the financial resources to care for their grandchildren, often those grandchildren must go into foster care with strangers while the grandparents go through the sometimes-laborious process of becoming licensed foster parents so that they can receive foster care payments to meet the children's basic needs. This legislation will prevent this delay and additional trauma.

Expanding eligibility for the grandparent caregiver subsidy also represents an important investment in narrowing the front door of entry into foster care. Children with willing and capable

grandparent caregivers generally should not need to enter foster care. As Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) Director Brenda Donald has emphasized on many occasions, it is essential for DC to invest in services to children and families outside of foster care so that fewer children will need to be removed from their families and communities. By ensuring that CFSA and the child welfare system as a whole – the constellation of many city agencies that serve children and families – has sufficient resources to address families’ needs, DC will be able to decrease the number of children who must enter into formal foster care, allowing the foster care system to focus on the children with the highest needs and preventing children with available family supports from entering more deeply into the foster care system.

This bill represents one piece of a much larger shift that must be made toward investing in communities and families in order to make foster care a rare intervention used only when there is no other option to keep a child safe and healthy. To make the vision of narrowing the front door into an achievable reality, DC must continue to invest not only in supports for grandparent caregivers but also in supports for other kinship caregivers and, importantly, for birth families. Parents with substance abuse disorders need access to high-quality substance abuse treatment. Parents with mental illness need access to high-quality psychiatric treatment. Teen parents need nurse home visiting programs to teach them how to care for their babies. Clearly, these needs go far beyond the scope of this bill, but I believe it is important for us to keep them in mind as we work together to improve the child welfare system.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

¹ Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a solid foundation of family, health and education. We are the largest provider of free legal services in the District and the only to focus on children. Our 80-

person staff partners with local pro bono attorneys to serve more than 2,000 at-risk children each year. We use this expertise to advocate for changes in the District's laws, policies and programs. Learn more at www.childrenslawcenter.org.

² For purposes of the subsidy, "grandparent" means a grandparent, great-grandparent, great-aunt, and great-uncle of a child. D.C. Code § 4-251.01