



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Transportation and the Environment**

April 11, 2014

Oversight Hearing for the DC Department of the Environment Budget

**Kathy Zeisel
Senior Supervising Attorney
Children's Law Center**

Good morning Chairwoman Cheh and members of the committee. My name is Kathy Zeisel. I am a Senior Supervising Attorney at Children's Law Center¹ (CLC) and a resident of the District of Columbia. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only devoted to children. Every year, we provide services to more than 2,000 low-income children and families, with a focus on abused and neglected children, and on those with special health and educational needs. Many of these children have asthma or other respiratory problems and live in homes with terrible housing conditions that aggravate their health conditions.

I am testifying today about the great work of the DC Department of the Environment's (DDOE) Healthy Homes program of the past year. We are testifying in opposition to the Mayor's budget cuts to the Lead and Health Housing activities of DDOE.² This decrease of \$525,000 will result in the loss of 7.2 FTEs and substantial impact vital programs, including practically ending the Healthy Homes program. We offer this testimony with the support of: Latino Economic Development Corporation, AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly, Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless and Legal Aid of the District of Columbia.

CLC sees the need for the Healthy Homes program, and for expanded protections for DC residents against the substantial presence of mold, in our work every day. CLC serves over 800 children per year through our medical legal partnerships with Children's National Health System (formerly Children's National Medical Center) and with Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Health. In these partnerships, our lawyers

work side-by-side with pediatricians in clinics that treat low-income families. Together, the doctors and lawyers find legal remedies to health problems that get in the way of a child's success.

Both CLC and several of our medical partners have had the opportunity to work with DDOE's Healthy Homes program. DDOE's Healthy Homes program brings public health experts into the homes of some of the most vulnerable children in DC to address serious housing conditions that impact the child's health. After homes are assessed for threats such as mold, lead and carbon monoxide by trained inspectors, the District works with property owners to reduce risks and provide an interim care plan.³ Healthy Homes has had impressive results already. Of the 144 families they have worked with, 93 have had children with asthma who were being impacted by the indoor air quality and others have had other serious health concerns.⁴ Per data provided by the Healthy Homes Branch Chief, Harrison Newton, through the public health approach coupled with intensive case management, Healthy Homes has achieved some or all of the repairs needed in 93% of their cases. This result is incredible for these families.

By using a public health approach and partnering with both the medical and advocacy community, Healthy Homes is a key partner in the fight for habitable housing in DC. As we have previously testified, mold is an area where it is difficult, if not impossible, to get any governmental or judicial enforcement, but we know that mold substantially impacts the health of DC residents with respiratory illnesses, the elderly and other people who are experience long term exposure to mold. As I testified during the February 25, 2014 DDOE hearing and at the January 2, 2014 hearing at the Joint

Hearing on B20-368, the Air Quality Amendment Act of 2013 and B20-569, the Air Pollution Disclosure and Reduction Act of 2013, our clients are turned away by DC Government when they seek help for mold and landlords pass inspections simply by painting over the mold.⁵ As a result, the children we work with continue to go to the emergency room for uncontrolled asthma and they miss school and their parents miss work. The costs, both in terms of health and financial, of allowing this loophole in the law are enormous.⁶

It is our opinion that the public health approach used by Healthy Homes is a key part of any effective solution to mold in this city. Because Healthy Homes is integral to ensuring habitable housing for some of our most vulnerable residents, we urge you to restore cuts to the program made in the Mayor's budget.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any 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 FY 2015 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan District Department of the Environment, F-47, see 3090.

³ Healthy Homes is a grantee under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which describes the Healthy Homes program as: The Healthy Homes Program addresses multiple childhood diseases and injuries in the home. The Initiative takes a comprehensive approach to these activities by focusing on housing-related hazards in a coordinated fashion, rather than addressing a single hazard at a time. The HHI builds upon HUD's successful Lead Hazard Control programs to expand its efforts to address a variety of environmental health and safety concerns including: mold, lead, allergens, asthma, carbon monoxide, home safety, pesticides, and radon. *See* http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/healthy_homes/hhi.

⁴ Data provided by the Healthy Homes Branch Chief, Harrison Newton to CLC available on request.

⁵ See attached testimony, Testimony before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Transportation and the Environment and Committee on Economic Development January 2, 2014, Joint Hearing on B20-368, the Air Quality Amendment Act of 2013 and B20-569, the Air Pollution Disclosure and Reduction Act of 2013.

⁶ Nationally, 9% of children have asthma. In DC, that number soars to 16% of our children who are diagnosed with asthma. Annie E. Casey Foundation, National Kids Count Report, 2011-12, at: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/30-percent-of-children-with-asthma-problems?loc=1&loct=2#ranking/3/any/true/1021/any/300>. The data available also clearly demonstrate asthma's enormous economic cost due to frequent emergency room visits and hospitalizations. From 2002 to 2007, the annual economic cost of asthma was \$56.0 billion in the U.S.; this includes direct health care costs of \$50.1 billion and indirect costs (lost productivity) contributing an additional \$5.9 billion. American Lung Association. Trends in Asthma Morbidity and Mortality. September, 2012, citing Barnett SB, Nurmagambetov TA. Costs of Asthma in the United States: 2002-2007. Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, 2011; 127(1):145-52. However, this does not account for the thousands of hours of lost instructional time for children who are too sick to go to school, nor the work hours their parents have missed due to taking their asthmatic children to the hospital or caring for them at home.