

Good morning Chairwoman Alexander and members of the Committee on Public Services and Consumer Affairs. My name is Rebecca Brink and I am a Policy Attorney at the Children's Law Center (CLC) and a District resident. 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 represent 1,200 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the performance of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) over the past year. We frequently represent clients dealing with unsafe housing conditions which are causing or exacerbating their children's health condition. Unfortunately, despite the best medical care, if housing conditions are not improved, children often do not get better and, in some cases, their illnesses get worse. Therefore, DCRA's residential inspection work is critically important to ensuring that our clients and their children live safe, healthy lives.

In the past year, DCRA took significant steps to ensure their inspectors are able to do high quality work by requiring all of the inspectors to be properly certified. Last summer, DCRA fired the inspectors who failed to properly certify in the designated time period. We strongly support this effort, however, these firings occurred shortly before the District's hiring freeze took effect and left the Department with a significant shortage of housing inspectors. Our latest information from DCRA is that there are seven (7) inspectors available to do residential inspections at the request of the tenant and 13 vacant positions. This is a significant decrease from even a few years ago when there were substantially more inspectors.

The District-wide hiring freeze has left DCRA without the necessary staff to fulfill its most basic functions and I urge you to work with the Mayor and the City Administrator to get this freeze lifted for the residential housing inspector positions. Doing so will not only ensure that children live in healthy and safe homes, but will also bring in revenue for the District, at a time when we desperately need it.

DCRA's inspections are a valuable tool for protecting the health and safety of families in the District. For example, a CLC client's infant had been bitten by mice while he was sleeping and had to be rushed to the emergency room. We brought in DCRA to inspect, and the inspector was so appalled by what she saw that she brought the property manager into the unit and told her what repairs had to be made on an emergency basis. As a result of the inspection, the entire unit was renovated and the child's health was no longer in danger due to the horrific housing conditions.

In another case, we requested a DCRA inspection for a unit that had numerous housing code violations, including bars which prevented the family from making a safe exit if a fire blocked access to their front door. When the landlord refused to make the repairs, DCRA fixed the problem and brought the landlord to an administrative hearing to collect the fines and be reimbursed for the work. Thanks to our advocacy and to DCRA, this family is safer and the District was able to collect fines from this irresponsible landlord.

One tangible result of the lack of inspectors is that DCRA's inspection wait times are three to four weeks for a non-emergency inspection. While it may be considered a "non-emergency" having a rat eating through your child's crib or water leaking from your ceiling and causing mold is certainly a crisis situation for a family. These situations cause health problems and waiting for a month or longer for an inspection is inappropriate. Due to their overly packed schedules inspectors

now focus only on the narrow issue for which a complaint was made rather than considering the surrounding issues or other violations in the apartment.

Another serious effect of the lack of inspectors is that DCRA is issuing fewer fines for violations because fewer inspections are occurring. In an era where the District needs to find all possible sources of revenue, we ought to have a robust system of citing and enforcing fines for housing code violations.

In conclusion, we thank DCRA for their work on behalf of our client population. We urge the Council to work with the Mayor to ensure the vacant inspector positions are promptly filled so that DCRA can properly carry out its work. We look forward to our continued work with DCRA to ensure that District families are living in safe and habitable rental units.

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