



Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
Proposed Fiscal Year 2012 Budget for the Department of Human Services

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Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Sharra E. Greer. I am the Policy Director of Children's Law Center¹ (CLC) 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 represent more than 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 this opportunity to testify regarding the Department of Human Services' proposed FY 2012 budget. We are deeply concerned about the proposed cuts in homeless services, \$20.5 million, and to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, \$5 million.² Chairman Graham I know you share our concerns. We feel, however, that we must be here today for the children who can't testify for themselves about the harm these cuts will cause. These cuts will lead to more children living in unsafe conditions and in foster care – causing short term trauma and long term damage to the District's children. CLC always tries to come to the Council with solutions, this time we don't have an easy way to find \$25.5 million to replace the proposed cuts. We do however want the Council to understand that if it adopts this budget as proposed the impact will be devastating. The cuts provide modest savings at a significant human and financial long term cost.

The proposed budget cut to homeless services will put as many as 300 families on the street.³ Already, preparing for the cut to homeless services, the District government has begun denying shelter to children and families who have no safe place to stay. Families are being turned away to spend the night in a doorway or under a bridge. One mother we know has taken refuge in an emergency room waiting area.

These families are often fleeing domestic violence and living in abandoned buildings or on the street. Families are not infrequently threatened with removal of their children for not separating from an abuser or remaining in housing that is otherwise unsafe for their children. If a family has no alternative to remaining in such a situation because they cannot access shelter, the District in some instances will need to remove the children from the family in order to protect them, at a financial cost that is over three times that of shelter – it costs on average \$80,000 more a year to place two children in foster care than it does to shelter a family with two children.⁴

The proposed cuts to TANF are likewise penny wise and pound foolish. We do not dispute that the District's TANF program is flawed and that reform is necessary. The Council should work with the Department of Human Services and advocates for low-income families to implement appropriate reforms that will lead to District residents moving from welfare to work. Continuing to cut off resources without reform will just make a bad situation worse. The District has already implemented a 20% reduction on families who have been receiving TANF for more than 60 months effecting 6,550 families.⁵ Full family sanctions are also going into effect in 2011. Further cuts will only deepen our already staggering child poverty rates. Currently, 29% of children in DC live in poverty, up from 22% in 2007. This represents the largest increase in poverty for any group in DC since the start of the recession.⁶ The number of DC residents living in deep poverty — meaning they live below half of the poverty line (just under \$11,000 for a family of four) -- is on the rise in DC; up from 8 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2009.⁷

In addition to increasing child poverty, reducing TANF will also lead to other devastating consequences for children. A study of young children in six large cities found that welfare sanctions and benefit decreases are associated with a significantly increased rate of hospitalizations in young children and significantly increased rates of food insecurity.⁸ Children who live in food insecure homes are more likely to suffer poor health, including illnesses that led to hospitalization.⁹ Other

studies suggest that children in families that are sanctioned do worse in several developmental areas and have lower scores on tests of quantitative and readings skills.¹⁰ There is also a link between reduction in welfare benefits and an increase in child maltreatment as measured by contact with child protective services, substantiated cases of physical abuse and neglect and by numbers of children in foster care.¹¹

The impact of these cuts goes even further. Putting children on the street, pushing them deeper into poverty and putting them into foster care has long term consequences. There are many studies that point to the negative impact of foster care on children's physical health, cognitive and academic functioning and social and emotional well-being.¹² In addition, there is a growing body of research that shows that the extraordinary stress of childhood poverty and the harms that accompany it – homelessness, abuse and neglect, malnutrition and exposure to violence, to name just a few – cause physical harm to children. The neural pathways in children's brains develop differently in children who live with the high levels of stress caused by poverty.¹³ And those differences lead to cognitive impairment and health problems that impact children's ability to learn.¹⁴ This leads to less success in school, higher drop-out rates, and increased participation in criminal activity.¹⁵

We urge the Committee and the Council to find a way to prevent these cuts. We know there are no easy answers in these economic times, but the budget should not be balanced with the health and future of the District's children.

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 safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 75-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 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.

² FY 2012 Proposed Budget E-9.

³ This estimate is from the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless based on the number of 2011 shelter applications to date.

⁴ The proposed FY 2012 budget includes the following local dollar expenditures in CFSA's budget, all of which are devoted entirely to children in foster care: Teen Services (\$2,031,000), Out of Home and Permanency (\$2,752,000), Child Placement (\$81,898,000), and Nurse Care Management Service (\$1,171,000). CFSA Proposed FY 2012 Budget Schedule 30-PBB at E-13 & E-14. The proposed budget also includes \$2,733,000 in local dollars spent on foster children's out-of-District general education tuition, Proposed OSSE FY 2012 Budget at D-38, line D201; and \$3,441,000 in legal costs to the Office of the Attorney General. Proposed OAG FY 2012 Budget at A194, line 8101. Those costs add up to \$94,026,000. In addition, CFSA spends the following sums of local dollars: \$756,000 for Family Resources, \$2,387,000 for Family Licensing, \$2,619,000 for Contract Monitoring, \$5,699,000 for In Home and Permanency I, \$4,514,000 for In Home and Permanency II, and \$11,257,000 for the Office of Clinical Practice. CFSA Proposed FY 2012 Budget Schedule 30-PBB at E-13 and E-14. All of these divisions devote a substantial amount – probably a large majority – of their spending to serving children in foster care. Conservatively accounting for only half of these costs brings the total amount of local dollars spent on foster care to \$107,642,000. There are 2092 children in foster care. CFSA FY 2010 Annual Report at 21. These figures average out to \$51,454.11 in local dollars per foster child per year. That figure *excludes* other costs, including the cost of special education tuition in out-of-District public schools, and management, policy, legal and overhead costs incurred by CFSA. It costs \$300,000 a month to run DC General. There are 153 families at DC General costing \$1,961 per family per month or about \$23,529 a year.

⁵ Data provided from DHS to the Committee on Human Services.

⁶ Jenny Reid, DCFPI, New Census Data Reveal the Uneven Impact the Recession Has Had on The District, Sept. 28, 2010.

⁷ Jenny Reid, DCFPI, New Census Data Reveal the Uneven Impact the Recession Has Had on The District, Sept. 28, 2010.

⁸ Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, *The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers*, 4 (July 2002). Infants and toddlers (up to the 3 years) in families who benefits had been terminated or reduced had a 30% higher risk of having been hospitalized, a 90% higher risk of being admitted to the hospital when visiting an emergency room and a 50% higher risk of being food insecure than children in families whose benefits had not been decreased.

⁹ Defining Poverty and Why It Matters for Children, Children's Defense Fund. August 2005.

¹⁰ West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, 36 (2006).

¹¹ The largest and most comprehensive study, which reviews 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).

¹² Brenda Jones Harden, *Safety and Stability for Foster Children: A Developmental Perspective*, Future of Children, Volume 14 Number 1 Winter 2004.

¹³ Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, *The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty*, Pathways Magazine (Winter 2011).

¹⁴ The Effects of Poverty on Children, The Future of Children, Summer/Fall 1997

¹⁵ Testimony of Jane Knitzer, Director of National Center for Children in Poverty, House Ways and Means Committee Hearing, Jan. 2007. http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_705.pdf and Child Poverty in America, Children's Defense Fund, August 2008.