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**Testimony of Stephanie Troyer
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**Before the Committee on Judiciary & Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia**

Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Office of Victim Services & Justice Grants

June 12, 2025

Chairwoman Pinto, it is an honor to appear before you and members of the Judiciary Committee today. My name is Stephanie Troyer, and I work as a Legal Director at Legal Aid DC.¹ I am before you to testify about the proposed 67% cut to Access to Justice funding in the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2026 budget.

This is the third year that the Mayor has proposed catastrophic cuts to the Access to Justice Initiative. I want to thank this Committee for its leadership in Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025. Due to your efforts, the Council reversed these cuts and preserved funding for programs to keep our neighbors housed, healthy, and safe from violence. We urge you to do so again.

Turning to the 2026 budget, I want to emphasize three points in my testimony today: (1) the impact that these cuts would have on Legal Aid and our ability to serve our clients; (2) the importance of local access to justice programs when federal funding for – and administration of – public services is increasingly precarious; and (3) the necessity of ensuring a reliable funding source for this program.

¹ Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit www.LegalAidDC.org.

Access to Justice Cuts Will Have Profound Impacts on Legal Aid

A 67% cut to Access to Justice funding would have a devastating impact on Legal Aid. Because these funds are distributed as grants by the D.C. Bar Foundation to legal service providers, we cannot put exact numbers on the effect this cut would have. But we know that the impact will be profound. Legal Aid DC is the largest grantee of the Initiative, and these funds are Legal Aid's single largest source of funding: 43% of our funding comes from Access to Justice grants, and 80 of our 120 staff are paid at least a portion of their salary using these dollars.

A substantial cut to Access to Justice funding will likely impact all of our major practice areas because the Initiative funds:

- \$3.15 million and 30 members in our housing practice, through which we represent District residents in eviction proceedings, as well as other efforts to preserve affordable housing, like helping tenants fight unlawful rent increases;
- \$1.14 million and 20 staff members in our domestic violence and family law practice, through which we represent survivors of domestic violence to get civil protection orders and ensure access to counsel in divorce, custody, and child support proceedings; and
- \$1.79 million and 23 staff in our consumer, public benefits, and immigration practices, through which we help District residents secure economic rights by challenging foreclosures, debt collection efforts, protect access to benefits like nutritional assistance and health insurance, and seek humanitarian immigration relief.

Because the Council protected Access to Justice Funding last year, we anticipate serving more than 5,000 District residents using this funding in 2025. In eviction, immigration, foreclosure, and domestic violence, our clients face immediate crises. The need for legal help is far greater than the capacity of the legal services community already, though we are making progress. Cutting funding for the Initiative will mean that thousands of our neighbors who we would otherwise help will face the legal system alone.

Access to Justice Addresses Cuts and Uncertainties in Government Programs

During a time of unprecedented change in the administration of federal programs, our most vulnerable neighbors rely on attorneys funded by the Access to Justice Initiative.

In the past few months, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has announced changes to make customer service less accessible. For example, people who need to make a change to their direct deposit are now required to do so in-person, facing wait-times of up to a month for an appointment, or they have to use an online system with multifactor authentication. Legal Aid's clients often struggle with internet access or have mobility or transportation concerns, and the elimination of phone services for something as simple as changing direct deposit can be the reason an elderly DC resident goes without money for food or necessary medical services. Legal Aid's Public Benefits Unit works to support our clients through the tumultuous changes in SSA processes which make it harder to access the life-sustaining benefits.

Locally, there are significant, ongoing issues with the Department of Human Services' (DHS) administration of public benefits' programs like nutrition and cash assistance. As we mentioned last year, our advocacy for individual clients is often the key to making sure the agency addresses these issues when their computer systems fail. We have represented many clients who received less in nutritional and cash assistance than the amount to which they were entitled due to an ongoing DHS computer issue which prevented the agency from correctly processing a change in income. While we do resolve these matters individually as clients come to Legal Aid, the computer issues persist. Our work for individual clients allows us to identify systemic concerns, and we continue to seek common ground with DHS to address the underlying technological problems.

Finally, District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA) voucher holders also have accessibility issues which Legal Aid works to address. DCHA is supposed to regularly process income information for tenants to ensure that they are being charged appropriate rent amounts. Unfortunately, DCHA has systemically failed to process timely income paperwork, meaning that many voucher-holders are charged inappropriately high rents and end up with eviction cases. DCHA has even moved to terminate these tenants' vouchers, claiming that the tenants failed to provide the required paperwork, even though DCHA lost the paperwork. Only with legal representation have tenants been able to get DCHA to pay the outstanding rent amounts to the landlords and withdraw pending voucher terminations.

While having a lawyer is no substitute for well-funded and administered federal and District government services, vulnerable residents rely on our legal services to ensure fairness and access to these critical systems. Too often, access to counsel makes the difference between a family going without proper food and nutrition due to computer errors in calculating a family's size, or a domestic violence survivor securing a transfer voucher to move to a new home away from someone who abused them. As a result, legal services are critical to ensuring that our neighbors can access programs that the Council

has funded – and that our residents get their fair share of federal benefits – and do not face the loss of housing, food, or healthcare due to breakdowns in the government's implementation of these programs.

The Access to Justice Initiative Needs Reliable, Stable Funding

Finally, as I discussed at the beginning of my testimony, this is the third year that Access to Justice funding faces deep cuts in the Mayor's budget proposal. This annual fight to preserve the status quo is untenable, and I urge the Committee, and the Council more broadly, to work with the Mayor to create a stable, permanent funding stream for the Initiative.

I joined Legal Aid in 2007 as a staff attorney in the Domestic Violence/Family Law Unit. This was the first year that the Council appropriated funds for Access to Justice programs, and I have been fortunate to contribute to, and witness, the importance of expanding legal services over the past 18 years. During this time, the Access to Justice program demonstrated the effectiveness of placing highly trained and skilled lawyers in the community, and the Council grew its funding. With this support, in recent years, we have been able to grow our reach and our impact because of your consistent investment. We have made our services more accessible, and as a result, our intakes in the first three months of the year have doubled in four years: 822 in 2022 to 1,035 in 2023, 1,590 in 2024, and 1,698 in 2025. We have been able to take on more cases by recruiting, training, and retaining our staff, which requires investment across multiple years. This progress is fragile – and cuts, or even the possibility of cuts – can set us back, and it could take years to return this level of effectiveness.

For Legal Aid, nearly all the funding we receive through this program is used to pay personnel expenses – that is salaries for our lawyers and program staff. As a result, uncertainty about funding is particularly difficult on a human level. The annual conversation about potential cuts to funding leads to recurring anxiety for my colleagues about their future. This conversation dissuades talented law students from entering the legal services profession altogether, and it drives lawyers to seek more stable careers in other kinds of public service. This is especially true with recent federal uncertainty and attacks regarding Public Service Loan Forgiveness. My dedicated colleagues, lawyers and paralegal professionals, can also make more money elsewhere – in the private sector or even in the government. However, we are deeply committed to our clients and this work, and we urge you to pursue a long-term path toward stability and predictability. Beyond the possibility of losing talent, a permanent funding stream is also critical to plan and grow strategically.

As you know, it took years of sustained commitment from the Council to fund and grow the Access to Justice programs, which are now a critical part of how the government can serve its most vulnerable constituents. That would not have been possible in the face of an annual conversation about slashing staffing levels by two thirds. That is equally true for this Initiative. We have the opportunity to continue building a legal services infrastructure that supports our most vulnerable neighbors. Doing so requires your support.

Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I urge the Committee and the Council to restore this funding and ensure that we are not back in the same posture next year. I also urge the Committee to ensure that other victims services funding that has been cut is also fully restored. Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.