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**Testimony of Vikram Swaarup
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**Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding the Office of Victim Services and Justice
Grants**

March 2, 2026

Legal Aid DC¹ submits the following testimony regarding the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG). We thank the Council for continuing to invest substantially in OVSJG. This investment allows Legal Aid to provide free legal services to some of our most vulnerable District neighbors. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and share with you the results of the funding Legal Aid receives from the Council's appropriations to OVSJG.

**As Extreme Income Inequality and Poverty Persist in DC, So Too Must Access
to Justice**

In the District, racial income inequality persisted in 2024 according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, with Black District households earning just 36% of the median income of white District households.² Per the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, these trends will likely worsen once 2025 data becomes available, given the devastating

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.

² *Inequality Remained Extreme in 2024 as DC Backslid on Poverty*, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/inequality-remained-extreme-in-2024-as-dc-backslid-on-poverty/> (Sept. 15, 2025).

impacts of federal layoffs and cuts to vital safety net programs like Medicaid and SNAP.³ Child poverty in the District reached 28.1%, an 11.2% spike from 2023 to 2024 – the largest year-to-year increase in a decade.⁴

These ominous and worsening economic conditions exist in the backdrop of a difficult budgetary and political environment in the District. The federal government has passed devastating cuts to the social safety net and increased the complexity of these programs, making it difficult for state administration. Ramped up immigration enforcement has trampled residents' civil rights. Federal layoffs have made it harder for residents to receive basic customer service from federal agencies that administer benefits programs. And even at the local level, the District's dire budget has led to deep cuts to anti-poverty programs.

In these circumstances, access to free civil legal services remains more urgent and important than ever. Legal Aid receives significant funding from OVSJG in the form of direct grants (to provide legal support to domestic violence survivors and returning citizens) and indirectly through the DC Bar Foundation. With OVSJG's support, Legal Aid provided legal services to over 10,500 people last year, including full representation in more than 1,600 cases, and conducted almost 7,000 intakes.⁵ Legal Aid continues to invest time and personnel to address systemic problems that will benefit everyone involved in the civil legal system. Below are just a few examples of how OVSJG funding has empowered Legal Aid to positively impact the lives of District residents.

Meeting the Moment with Immigration Law

Attacks on DC's immigrant communities – part of a nationwide trend of cruelty and harm – have left our neighbors afraid to leave their homes, take children to school, attend medical appointments, and more. OVSJG's funding supported our newly expanded Immigration Law Unit, which has filled in a widening gap where nonprofit organizations, unjustly targeted by the federal government, have lost significant funding. Our Unit has grown not only in terms of staff members, but in areas of law and expertise to meet this moment. One former client with protected status was picked up off the street by

³ *Id.*

⁴ *DC Child Poverty Back to Extreme Level After Short-Lived Progress*, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/dc-child-poverty-back-to-extreme-level-after-short-lived-progress/> (Feb. 19, 2026).

⁵ Legal Aid DC 2025 Annual Report, <https://www.legalaiddc.org/2025-annual-report-introduction>.

immigration enforcement without a warrant. He was sent to a detention center and pressured to self-deport. Legal Aid filed a *habeas corpus* petition, a first for our team, and a federal judge ordered the client's release. Legal Aid staff picked him up in the middle of the night from a detention facility in Virginia and brought him home to his family in the District. Legal Aid has conducted vital community outreach on immigration law, conducting more than a dozen brief advice clinics at the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, with plans to expand outreach to the wider immigrant community.

Defending Against the Erosion of Tenants' Rights

Legal Aid DC's Housing Unit remains our largest practice, conducting more than 2,500 intakes, with more than 80% of cases involving eviction-related issues in 2025. Our housing practice has responded to the erosion of tenants' rights in the District, stemming from the RENTAL Act's passage and the severe reduction in Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) benefits, among other harmful developments. Evictions reached a 10-year high in 2025, and 75% of low-income District residents spend more than 30% of their income on rent, issues we have seen reflected in our client community.

In the face of these challenges, Legal Aid DC handled more than 500 housing cases in 2025, demonstrating that our services are a critical intervention for tenants seeking justice and fair treatment from landlords and the courts. For example, one of our housing clients, Ms. A, had a Section 8 housing voucher. Ms. A came to us after her landlord sued to evict her for non-payment of rent. Her landlord had misplaced her subsidy paperwork, causing her rental subsidy payments to be halted. The landlord also failed to respond to Ms. A's application for emergency rental assistance that would have lowered her rent balance. At the same time, there were significant issues in her unit, including mold in her kitchen, water leaks from other apartments, and mice. Legal Aid negotiated with her landlord's counsel, with a focus on protecting her subsidy. Ms. A agreed to move out of the building with a clean slate. Her overdue rent was waived, she got back her security deposit, and she was able to find better housing.

Legal Aid's housing attorneys continue to staff the Landlord and Tenant Legal Assistance Network (LTLAN) hotline,⁶ provide same-day eviction defense assistance two days a week at the DC Superior Court, staff and support the Housing Right to Counsel Project,⁷ and more – each initiative helping to close the representation gap: just 15% of

⁶ LTLAN is a single intake hotline where low-income District residents can get free legal information, advice, or legal representation by phone or online.

⁷ The Housing Right to Counsel Project guarantees counsel for tenants with subsidies facing eviction based on allegations that they violated their lease. Through Right to

tenants go to court without an attorney, versus 95% of landlords who are represented. We rely heavily on OVSJG's support to ensure that tenants can vindicate their rights in court and that no one is evicted without due process.

Clearing Hurdles to Public Benefits

Our Public Benefits Unit intervenes for District residents when they hit roadblocks trying to access critical public benefits like food assistance, Social Security, disability assistance, unemployment insurance, and more. Before finding Legal Aid, many of our clients spend weeks or months trying to contact government agencies about their issues. We advocate directly with agency staff to get benefits corrected or restarted, taking cases on appeal to the Office of Administrative Hearings, before administrative judges of the Social Security Administration, or to local or federal court when needed. In 2025, Legal Aid conducted nearly 1,000 Public Benefits intakes, closed close to 150 cases, and our attorneys' advocacy resulted in almost \$2 million in financial benefits for our clients.

One of our major initiatives over the last year – that will likely continue in the years to come – is ensuring that our neighbors understand the changes to the social safety net and can preserve their eligibility in this shifting environment. For example, before the implementation of income and eligibility limits to the Alliance Program in October 2025, Legal Aid and coalition partners jumped into action by contacting existing clients and organizing outreach events to ensure eligible people could enroll or recertify in the program. At just one event, our coalition assisted 230 people with their Alliance benefits. One of our Public Benefits clients and a cancer survivor, Ms. B, had Alliance coverage set to expire on September 30, 2025. Her cancer had returned, and she had to quit her job to cope with her illness. Legal Aid helped her submit a new application for Alliance benefits, reporting her loss of income. Without legal representation, she may have lost coverage on October 1 – just as she needed it most. OVSJG funding enables our Public Benefits Unit to prepare our clients and legal practice for new threats and upcoming changes to SNAP, TANF, Medicare, and Medicaid – vital lifelines for our client community.

Fighting Evolving Predatory Consumer Practices

Focused on relief from debt collection and other threats to financial stability, Legal Aid's Consumer Law Unit defends District residents' homes, savings, and livelihoods from predatory practices that evolve to evade regulation. Our attorneys not only make critical interventions at key moments; they also walk clients through all available options in

Counsel, Legal Aid works with dozens of law firms to guarantee representation for over 100 tenants with subsidies – a vital service because residents risk losing their subsidy if they are evicted.

accessible terms. Having a Legal Aid attorney means our clients have a robust defense against debt they may never be able to repay. For example, one client, Ms. C, received a hearing notice because a debt collector had revived a 12-year-old judgment against her for a debt she didn't even know existed. Ms. C lives with a disability and a fixed income and had no way to pay this debt. Once Ms. C contacted Legal Aid, our attorneys let the collector know we planned to contest the case. The debt collector agreed to withdraw the revival, clearing Ms. C of an overwhelming and life-altering burden.

In 2025, our Consumer Law unit conducted more than 450 intakes, closed 121 cases, and our work resulted in more than \$12 million in financial benefits for our clients. Another initiative in our Consumer Law Unit is assisting District residents whose homes are at risk of involuntary sales because they have fallen behind on property taxes. Together with partners, Legal Aid sent almost 600 letters to District residents and assisted 24 homeowners by providing advice and information.

Empowering Survivors of Domestic Violence and District Families

Our Family Law and Domestic Violence Unit helps clients navigate complex systems during some of their most vulnerable moments, assisting clients in moving towards lasting safety and independence for themselves and their children. Our attorneys are experts in a diverse array of matters, from Civil Protection Orders, custody, divorce, child support, and parentage cases. This Unit also works closely with our Immigration Unit, assisting clients at the intersection of domestic violence and immigration law – namely, survivors of domestic violence who may be eligible for legal status. In 2025, the Family Law and Domestic Violence Unit conducted more than 650 domestic violence and almost 1,300 family law intakes, closing more than 500 cases in both areas. Our attorneys have also played a leading role in coalitions advocating for the District's reforms to TANF, ensuring families receive a larger share of their child support payments, and in pushing for the pause of child support collections from incarcerated parents who have no ability to pay. Through this complex and integral work, our attorneys support custodial and non-custodial parents alike, fighting back against insurmountable debt and barriers to reentry while helping District families receive the money they deserve.

Uprooting Systemic Challenges

Legal Aid is not only concerned with the day-to-day needs of our clients – we are focused on identifying and uprooting systemic challenges that make DC's legal system less just and equitable for our client community. We use the expertise gained from our OVSJG-funded direct services work to pursue policy advocacy and recommendations, affirmative impact litigation and appeals, and community engagement. In 2025, we submitted testimony informed by our direct services to the Council more than 40 times and conducted almost 40 community outreach events to inform and empower District

residents. In 2025, our systemic advocacy focused on social programs in the District, advocating for low or no cuts to critical programs, for reforms to the child support system, and for the restoration of the Alliance program. Our impact litigation and appeals practice included the filing of amicus briefs in federal lawsuits defending immigrants' rights, and lawsuits defending community members against environmental racism in Ivy City, housing discrimination in NoMa, and neglectful landlords providing unlivable housing conditions to tenants at Marbury Plaza in SE.

Conclusion

Legal Aid is deeply grateful to the Council for its continued support of OVSJG. Put plainly, we could not do our work and serve our clients without this essential funding. We hope the Council will consider our ongoing impact on our client community and the District as a whole and ask that the Council and the Administration continue to support and expand the critical role that OVSJG plays in the funding of core legal services for thousands of District residents.