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**Testimony of Jillean Workman  
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**Before the Committee on Human Services  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Department of Human Services**

**April 30, 2026**

Legal Aid<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony regarding the Department of Human Services' (DHS) administration of the Community Legal Education and Resources (CLEAR) grant. Legal Aid urges the Council to provide a robust restoration of funding for CLEAR in Fiscal Year 2027 to ensure immigrant residents have access to justice. On April 20, 2026, Mayor Bowser presented the proposed Fiscal Year 2027 budget for DC. That budget did not include funding for the CLEAR grant in 2027, and though the Mayor's office has communicated that an errata letter would be published addressing CLEAR funding, that letter has yet to be published at the time of this writing. CLEAR funding is essential to the operation of legal services for low-income DC residents.

**Investment in CLEAR Funding Supports Better Legal Outcomes  
for DC's Immigrant Residents**

Immigrants are an essential and large part of DC's community. In 2024, DC was comprised of approximately 97,388 immigrants, around 14% of the total population.<sup>2</sup> Of

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<sup>1</sup>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](http://www.LegalAidDC.org).

<sup>2</sup> This figure refers to the number of foreign-born (born outside of the United States and its territories) residents in DC, U.S. Census Bureau, 2020-2024 American Community

that number, approximately 35,000 residents were undocumented – about 35% of D.C.’s immigrant population.<sup>3</sup> These figures represent neighbors, workers, parents, children, and community members that contribute meaningfully to the District’s economy and culture. Many of these undocumented residents live in mixed-status households where at least one member of their family, often their children, may have lawful status. For these residents, access to legal services can be a vital family-stabilizing force.

In immigration proceedings, there is no right to government-appointed counsel, though the stakes are extremely high. A 2022 report by the Vera Institute of Justice found that more than 90% of cases involving unaccompanied children resulted in an order of removal when the child was unrepresented; however, children who had the benefit of legal representation were more than 7 times more likely to avoid removal.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a report by the American Immigration Council found that between 2019 and 2024, only 26.9% of non-citizens with legal representation were ordered removed, as opposed to 61.8% who went without representation.<sup>5</sup> Despite the life-altering benefit of access to counsel, for many low-income residents in DC, private legal counsel is cost-prohibitive, and it is here that non-profit legal service organizations provide a lifeline for residents.

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Survey 5-Year Estimates. Legal Aid DC elected to use data from the ACS 5-year estimates to provide the most accurate information with a smaller margin of error when compared to ACS 1-year estimates.

<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2024.DP05?g=040XX00US11&y=2024&d=ACS+5>

<sup>3</sup> Passel, Jeffrey S., and Jens Manuel Krogstad. *U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population Reached a Record 14 Million in 2023*. Pew Research Center, 21 Aug. 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/08/21/u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-population-reached-a-record-14-million-in-2023/>

<sup>4</sup> DiBennardo, Rebecca, and Alyssa Snider. *Representation Matters: No Child Should Appear in Immigration Proceedings Alone*. Vera Institute of Justice, Dec. 2021, <https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/representation-matters.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> American Immigration Council. *Where Can You Win in Immigration Court? The Impact of Lawyers, Detention, Geography, and Policy, Special Report*. American Immigration Council, Nov. 20, 2025, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/report/immigration-court/>.

Rapidly-changing federal immigration policies have made it increasingly difficult for residents to understand and comply with the law. Eligibility requirements for immigration relief, work authorization rules, and enforcement priorities frequently shift with little or no notice. For many vulnerable DC residents, particularly victims of human trafficking, survivors of domestic violence, and children, these changes create confusion and risk of unknowing non-compliance. Without access to free legal services, minor errors in an application or missed deadlines can result in devastating consequences such as removal and family separation.

### **CLEAR Funding Bolsters Trust in Local Government and Public Institutions**

Increased immigration enforcement has resulted in a culture of fear and an erosion of trust in public institutions. Over the past year we have seen a significant increase in immigration enforcement, with nearly 20,000 arrests by ICE across the DMV area from 2025 to present – an almost 430% increase from 2024.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, many DC residents are afraid to go to work, take their children to school, access healthcare, and report crimes to the local authorities, all of which negatively affects the economy and overall safety of the district.

Immigrants play a vital role in the District's economy. There are approximately 20,000 undocumented workers in DC as of 2022, and many of those workers are forced to stay home from work for fear of detention, causing severe labor shortages in construction and restaurants.<sup>7</sup> Of the workers who remain in the labor force, many are reluctant to report labor violations and unsafe conditions. As more immigrant residents forgo work in fear of

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<sup>6</sup> Heim, Joe, and Martinez, Emmanuel. *ICE arrests surge across D.C., Maryland and Virginia*. The Washington Post, 6 Apr. 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/04/06/ice-arrests-dc-maryland-virginia-surge>

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center. *U.S. unauthorized immigrations in the labor force for states, 2022*, July 24, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/08/21/u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-population-reached-a-record-14-million-in-2023>; Schaffer, Michael. *The Bougie Fallout of ICE's Crackdown in D.C.* Politico Magazine, 20 Sept. 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/09/20/ice-crackdown-dc-elite-00573586>; Markoff, Shira, David Dyssegaard Kallick, and Shamier Settle. *The Devastating Economic and Human Toll of Mass Deportation*. DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 18 Aug. 2025, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/the-devastating-economic-and-human-toll-of-mass-deportation/>.

being detained and separated from their families, it creates a strain on not only the economy and the hardest-hit industries, but also on the financial stability of immigrant families.

Similarly, many immigrants who may be experiencing domestic violence, or are the victims of crime, are unwilling to report those crimes to police because they fear adverse immigration consequences such as detention by federal law enforcement. Targeted federal policy that disrupts programs such as the U-visa program, which relies on immigrant victim cooperation with law enforcement, has discouraged victims in DC from coming forward.<sup>8</sup> A decrease in victim cooperation with law enforcement puts everyone in DC at an increased risk of becoming victims of violent crime, undermining both individual and public safety.<sup>9</sup>

Investment in non-profit legal providers strengthens trust between immigrant communities and local government. Non-profit legal providers help eligible individuals to secure or maintain lawful status, obtain work authorization, and continue contributing to the District. When residents lose work authorization or face detention with no legal assistance this impacts employers, families, and local economies. With changing federal policies and rampant misinformation, front line legal providers provide an invaluable service by providing residents with the information they need to remain in compliance with the law and plan for their families' futures. When DC residents know that they have access to accurate information and competent legal representation, they are more likely to engage with public institutions, whether that means reporting a crime, seeking medical care, or participating in their children's education. This trust is essential in bridging the communication and service gap between DC government and immigrant residents.

### **Clear Funding is Critical in Supporting Legal Aid DC's Mission to Serve Low-Income Immigrant Residents**

CLEAR funding is one of two grants that support Legal Aid's Immigration Law Unit. The Immigration Law Unit began as a Project in 2018 that was initially housed in Legal Aid's

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<sup>8</sup> Flynn, Meagan, and María Luisa Paúl. *As ICE ramped up in D.C., immigrant crime victims faced visa roadblocks*. The Washington Post, 10 Apr. 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/04/10/u-visas-dc-ice-arrests/>

<sup>9</sup> Flynn, Meagan, and María Luisa Paúl. *As ICE ramped up in D.C., immigrant crime victims faced visa roadblocks*. The Washington Post, 10, Apr. 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/04/10/u-visas-dc-ice-arrests/>

Domestic Violence and Family Law Unit, providing services to survivors of domestic violence who were vulnerable due to their legal status. In October 2024, in direct response to a growing need in the community for free legal services, the Project became its own Unit, hosting a staff of five attorneys, one fellow, and a paralegal.

Since becoming a Unit, we have expanded the scope of our representation to include a wide range of humanitarian areas such as deportation defense, U-visas, T-visas, Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) cases, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, naturalization, federal habeas litigation, and mandamus actions.<sup>10</sup> In 2025, we conducted nearly 500 immigration intakes – a 39% increase from 2024. In the first two quarters of this grant, beginning in October 2025, we have conducted 248 intakes and, taken on 68 full representation cases funded by CLEAR for DC residents. We are on track to exceed previous metrics. This expanded scope was only possible with CLEAR funding.

Legal Aid DC is uniquely positioned to efficiently use CLEAR funding as our holistic model for legal services allows us to address most civil legal issues that our clients may face with in-house referrals to our other units, including Family Law and Domestic Violence, Consumer, Public Benefits, and Housing. This is especially important as vulnerable immigrants are less likely to report crimes or seek legal assistance due to fear of immigration consequences, misinformation, and distrust of public institutions.<sup>11</sup> Our coordinated holistic services approach allows us to bridge the gap between fear and access to justice. This approach allows for trusted referrals, early issue-spotting, and comprehensive representation that helps immigrant clients safely engage with legal systems and achieve equitable outcomes.

As a trusted community resource, we also partner with a local charter school to provide support and referrals. As part of our partnership, we deliver several Know Your Rights

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<sup>10</sup> The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) allows the abused spouse, children, and parents of legal permanent residents or U.S. citizens to apply for lawful immigration status without the sponsorship of the abusive spouse.

<sup>11</sup> McConnell, Micaela, and Steven Hubbard. *Learning in the Shadows: How Immigration Enforcement Harms Students and Schools*. American Immigration Council, 26 Aug. 2025, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/immigration-enforcement-harms-students-schools/>; Heim, Joe, and Martinez, Emmanuel. *ICE arrests surge across D.C., Maryland and Virginia*. The Washington Post, 6 Apr. 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/04/06/ice-arrests-dc-maryland-virginia-surge>

presentations annually to the DC community. During the past two grant quarters we conducted 5 Know Your Rights presentations to a total of 603 attendees.

Legal Aid does not rely on funding from the federal government which has allowed us to remain open to serving the immigrant community in DC as we continue to conduct intakes, provide legal counsel, and take on full representation cases – while several legal service providers in DC have had to reduce operations in response to federal funding cuts and changes.<sup>12</sup> Uncertainty and changes in federal funding distribution widens the access to justice gap in DC and makes it significantly more difficult for vulnerable immigrants to succeed in navigating complex immigration systems. This underscores the importance of CLEAR funding, as a reduction in funding would require us to similarly decrease our staff, leading to a decline in services for DC residents.

## **Conclusion**

Despite guaranteed CLEAR funding through Fiscal Year 2026, Legal Aid’s Immigration Law Unit is still underfunded, and with an increased demand for legal services and a rise in complex cases, we face drastic staffing cuts if CLEAR funding is not restored. The gap between the community’s needs and the ability of legal service providers to adequately meet the increasing volume is growing. Legal Aid DC is dedicated to meeting the growing needs of DC’s immigrant community by increasing our capacity, and expanding our expertise, in response to shifting federal policies and enforcement priorities. However, we cannot do that without continued CLEAR funding. As federal immigration systems became more punitive and unpredictable, CLEAR funding is critical to the operation of free legal services for low-income DC residents. We urge the Council to robustly restore CLEAR funding.

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<sup>12</sup> A 2025 National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts, conducted by George Mason University, the Urban Institute and American University shows that 43% of nonprofits headquartered in the greater D.C region experienced federal funding cuts, pauses or delays that resulted in staff reduction and stop work orders.

Urban Institute. *How Government Funding Disruptions Affected Greater Washington, DC Region Nonprofits in Early 2025*. Urban Institute, 16 Dec. 2025, [How Government Funding Disruptions Affected Nonprofits in Early 2025 | Urban Institute](#).