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**Testimony of Megan Browder  
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**Before the Committee of the Whole  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding Fiscal Year 2027 Local Budget Act, Budget  
Support Act, and Federal Portion Budget Request Act**

**May 13, 2026**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the Fiscal Year 2027 Budget. Legal Aid DC<sup>1</sup> knows that the Council must make tough choices this budget season. District residents who are already struggling, however, should not be required to give up more. The mayor's proposed budget drastically cuts several social safety net programs that these residents need to survive. We urge the Council to reverse TANF cuts, fund individual housing vouchers and ERAP, and restore Access to Justice funding.

**The Council Should Protect TANF As A Lifeline for District Families**

Without Council action, families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) will face stricter work requirements, sanctions for failing to meet those requirements, and some will be shut out of the program altogether. These changes will

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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).

push more children, particularly in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8, further into poverty.<sup>2</sup> We ask the Council to restore TANF cash assistance funding for District residents who are, by definition, most in need.

Worse, the proposed budget does not include a cost-of-living adjustment for families receiving TANF, which practically means that current TANF benefits will be reduced for those families. We have all felt the pinch of increased inflation, but for these families a 3 or 5% reduction in their real purchasing power may mean not being able to buy food, medicine, or diapers that month.

The proposed budget also includes stricter work requirements and harsher sanctions for failing to meet those requirements. Research shows that work requirements and sanctions inflict great harms on families and do little to actually increase workforce participation.<sup>3</sup> Further, the proposed budget also will leave some families shut out of the program altogether at \$0 benefits if they have received federal funding from the program for 60 months. We ask the Council to reverse these punitive proposed cuts and instead protect TANF as the lifeline it is for thousands of District families.

### **The Council Should Protect and Preserve Healthcare for All District Residents**

Last year's budget left thousands of DC residents without healthcare. The mayor's proposed FY27 budget preserves health insurance coverage for tens of thousands of low-income people and allocates funding for dental and vision benefits. That is a great start, but the Council must do more. Due to upcoming federal cuts, hundreds of DC residents will lose access to Medicaid and Medicare, leaving Alliance and Healthy DC as their only options. The District has always been a leader in making healthcare accessible to all, but uninsured rates have been rising.<sup>4</sup> To maintain its position, the Council must make sure that healthcare is accessible for all. This means restoring Alliance income and age eligibility and services to pre-FY26 levels, and closing the income eligibility gap

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<sup>2</sup> Performance Oversight Responses for the Department of Human Services, at 162 (March 3, 2025), <https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/DHS-Combined-POH-Responses-3.3.2025.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Ctr. On Budget & Pol'y Priorities, *TANF Studies Show Work Requirement Proposals for Other Programs Would Harm Millions, Do Little to Increase Work* (Nov. 2018), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/tanf-studies-show-work-requirement-proposals-for-other-programs-would-harm-millions-do>.

<sup>4</sup> See Am. Community Survey Br., *Health Insurance Coverage by State 2023 and 2024* (Sept. 2025) (showing a 2.2% increase in the uninsured rate from 2023 to 2024), <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/acsbr-024.pdf>.

between Medicaid and Healthy DC so that District residents do not fall through the cracks.

### **The Council Should Act to Prevent Homelessness**

The mayor's proposed budget – like last year's – does not include any funding for new permanent supportive or Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) housing vouchers for individuals and families. Housing investments are especially critical now, when the federal government is hostile to unhoused people and DC rents (while easing somewhat) are still nearly 40% higher than the national average.<sup>5</sup> LRSP vouchers, in particular, provide a targeted way for the District to end chronic homelessness. While some individuals and families need and benefit from the wrap around services included with PSH vouchers, many do not. More funding for LRSP vouchers will allow more people to access housing that would otherwise be out of their reach.

Legal Aid also asks the Council to increase Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funding. DC evictions are at a 10-year high, and growing.<sup>6</sup> For thousands of households, ERAP is the difference between catching up on rent and a life-altering eviction. Despite increasing need, the mayor's proposed budget cuts ERAP funding to just \$7 million. This is after ERAP has been annually slashed from \$63 million in FY24, to \$25 million in FY25, and \$8.6 million last year. It is illogical for funding to decrease as the need increases. Further, the average ERAP award in FY26 was approximately \$6,800. At the mayor's proposed \$7 million, only about 1,000 households would be able to access ERAP, a fraction of the estimated 8,000 households in need.<sup>7</sup> We ask the Council to consider funding ERAP such that, at minimum, at least 4,000 households can benefit.

### **The Council Should Restore Access to Justice Funding**

For the fourth year in a row, the mayor's budget significantly cuts funding for the Access to Justice Initiative – this time an 86% decrease. Gutting Access to Justice would be devastating for our community. Last year, Legal Aid provided free legal services to approximately 6,000 District residents. If Access to Justice Funding is not restored, roughly 5,000 of those people will not have legal representation next year. Without the

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<sup>5</sup> Apartments.com, *Cost of Living in Washington, DC*, <https://www.apartments.com/cost-of-living/washington-dc/> (last accessed May 11, 2026).

<sup>6</sup> UPO, *Evictions in DC Jumped Sharply in 2025*, <https://www.upo.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/UPO-Evictions-white-paper-March-2026.pdf> (last accessed May 11, 2026).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

Council restoring funding, approximately one-third of Legal Aid's staff may not have funding. That means that 40 lawyers and staff would be unable to help domestic violence survivors, low-income homeowners, immigrants, residents navigating the public benefits system, and residents facing debt collection and eviction. Having a lawyer not only improves residents' outcomes, it also helps the court process move more efficiently and ensures that District residents can access the programs and benefits that the Council has funded.

We thank the Council for its support and commitment over the last four years to restore funding for the Initiative. We ask the Council to do so again and create permanent, recurring funding for the Initiative so that access to civil legal services can remain a stable, core part of the District's justice system.

### **Conclusion**

Legal Aid knows that the Council is faced with a growing number of priorities compared to revenue estimates. But that is the same position so many District residents are in – rising inflation, workforce layoffs, and reduced federal funding are hitting individual household budgets hard. We urge the Council not to cut social safety net programs at the precise time where more people may need them. Legal Aid asks that the Council protect TANF, healthcare, stable housing, and access to justice.