



**Testimony for the Oversight Hearing for the Office of Victim Services (FY 2012-2013)
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety Performance
Council of the District of Columbia
February 20, 2013, 10:00 a.m.
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On behalf of the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia, I testify in support of the Office of Victim Services, which does such important work for survivors of domestic violence in D.C. I am a staff attorney in the Family/Domestic Violence Unit at Legal Aid¹. I provide legal assistance and representation to domestic violence survivors seeking to obtain a Civil Protection Order. I also provide legal assistance to survivors who are seeking to obtain or enforce child custody, child support, visitation or divorce/legal separation orders. As survivors often present with a myriad of inter-related legal issues, my colleagues and I at Legal Aid also strive to provide holistic legal assistance on matters of housing, public benefits and consumer law, as well as social services and other referrals.

The Office of Victim Services (OVS) is critical to providing safety and protection for domestic violence survivors in the District of Columbia. OVS has become an essential and active leader within the local community of domestic violence advocates. In particular, we appreciate OVS's work in convening the Victim Assistance Network. In this regard, OVS recently organized an expert panel on stalking as part of Stalking Awareness Month and in March organized a meeting to discuss the recent Human Rights Watch report regarding the police department's response to sexual assault victims.

¹ The Legal Aid Society was formed in 1932 to "provide legal aid and counsel to indigent persons in civil law matters and to encourage measures by which the law may better protect and serve their needs." Legal Aid is both the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. Over the last 80 plus years, Legal Aid has been *making justice real* – in individual and systemic ways – for persons living in poverty in D.C.

Through the generous support we receive through OVS, Legal Aid is able to provide critically-needed legal services to low-income domestic violence survivors through our Domestic Violence Intake Center Southeast (DVIC-SE) Project. This Project which operates out of the Court's satellite office in Southeast D.C. is located in the United Medical Center and primarily serves Wards 7 & 8, the wards with the highest poverty rates in the District. Three attorneys from Legal Aid, including myself, staff the Center four days a week. There we meet with domestic violence survivors who come seeking assistance with obtaining a Civil Protection Order (CPO) and other social and legal services. When we meet with survivors, they are frequently in crisis – they have experienced significant trauma due to the domestic violence, are in urgent need of protection, and are struggling to make important decisions about the future. The collaborative nature of the DVIC-SE is designed to address all of these and other pressing concerns. In addition to receiving medical attention for any injuries sustained from the abuse, survivors can meet with a Legal Aid lawyer, a safety advocate, an officer from the Metropolitan Police Department's Domestic Violence Unit, a Crime Victims Compensation representative, and apply for a Civil Protection Order all in one place. As a result, the DVIC-SE serves to provide critical resources to domestic violence survivors in one central and convenient location and during the initial start of their protection order cases.

During my time working at the Southeast Domestic Violence Intake Center, I have seen the importance and value of early intervention to providing necessary services to survivors of domestic violence. Our clients live in poverty and many do not have the funds or the ability to travel to seek services. The lack of such resources hinders their efforts to leave abusive partners causing further distress and trauma to their already fractured lives. As a result of our presence at the DVIC-SE, Legal Aid is able to meet with survivors at a time and place that is convenient to them and meet with them at a critical time when they need advice about legal options.

The story of my client, Ms. Pika, whom I met at the DVIC-SE, provides a good example. Ms. Pika came to the DVIC-SE to file for a Civil Protection Order against her child's father, Mr. Smith, following an extended period

of physical abuse including an assault that occurred in their son's presence. After Ms. Pika left Mr. Smith, he continued to follow and abuse her at her relatives' homes where she was staying. Having nowhere left to stay, Ms. Pika and her son became homeless and were in urgent need of protection when she arrived at the DVIC-SE. After we met, I assisted her through the CPO process, and she successfully obtained a CPO against Mr. Smith. I also referred her to Crime Victims Compensation at the DVIC-SE who assisted her with securing temporary emergency housing. As a result of the assistance she was able to receive at the DVIC-SE, Ms. Pika was able to extricate herself from an abusive relationship and actively participate in her CPO case. Stories like this, and Legal Aid's DVIC-SE Project, would not be possible without the support of OVS.

I would like to provide the council with some numbers that underscore the important role of the Southeast Domestic Violence Intake Center in the District. In 2011, the Legal Aid Society provided legal services to 237 domestic violence survivors from the DVIC-SE. By the end of 2012, that number increased to 282, an increase of 19 percent. The Legal Aid Society has been a part of the Southeast Domestic Violence Intake Center since 2003.

Continued grant funding through Office of Victim Services remains a critical resource for the Legal Aid Society's domestic violence work, and ongoing support from the Council is essential to our ability to continue providing vitally-needed services to low-income victims of domestic violence in the District. I urge you to maintain the baseline budget of \$13 million dollars for OVS.

Finally, I would note that Legal Aid is familiar with the work of OVS because of its receipt of access to justice funding administered by OVS. I am told that OVS does this work with great expertise, precision, and professionalism. This is yet another function performed by OVS which greatly helps our client community.

I would like to thank the Council and the District of Columbia for providing such an important resource to my clients and myself. I ask for your continued support. Thank you.