

**Testimony on Fiscal Year 2014 Budget Oversight Hearing
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety Performance**

**Council of the District of Columbia
April 17, 2013, 10:00 a.m.**

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The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia¹ supports the proposed Fiscal Year 2014 budget for the Office of Victims' Services, which maintains level funding for the Office of Victim Services. OVS's many programs and services make District families and communities safer. As a domestic violence attorney at Legal Aid, I provide legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence seeking to obtain a Civil Protection Order (CPO) against their abusers. In addition to providing representation to survivors in their CPO cases, we also help them address more long-term security and independence from their abusers through child custody, child support, visitation, and divorce actions. Our clients, like many other victims of crime in the District, rely on OVS to provide vital services that help ensure their safety and protection. We ask that the Council continue its support of OVS and additionally, appropriate further funding for the domestic violence hotline and a dedicated interpreter fund.

Among other things, OVS has taken the lead in establishing the Victims Assistance Network (VAN) where victims' services organizations meet to discuss challenges facing victims and to coordinate a community response that is both holistic in its approach and sensitive to underserved populations. The District's two Domestic Violence Intake Centers (DVIC) – one in D.C. Superior Court in Northwest D.C. and the other in the United Medical Center hospital in Southeast D.C. – were established as a result of the VAN members who identified the significant unmet needs of domestic violence victims. Several of my Legal Aid colleagues and I staff the DVICs four days a week, where we meet with victims of domestic violence, often on the heels of a violent incident, to help them obtain protection orders against their abusers.

Many of those who utilize the DVICs, and all of our clients, are low-income. The DVIC in Southeast, where I work, primarily serves Wards 7 and 8, the two wards with the highest concentration of poverty in the District. For many low-income victims of domestic violence, the DVIC-SE is an indispensable resource. They can meet with a Court clerk to file for a protection order; file a police report with an officer from the Metropolitan Police Department; secure critical services through Crime Victims Compensation; receive safety planning and other support services from SAFE; and meet with a Legal Aid attorney to receive assistance with their CPO case and related matters. The DVIC effectively serves as a "one-stop shop" for victims of

¹ The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia 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." For more than 80 years, tens of thousands of the District's neediest residents have been served by Legal Aid staff and volunteers. Legal Aid currently works in the following four priority areas: consumer, family law, housing, and public benefits. It also maintains an appellate advocacy project that litigates poverty law matters in the D.C. Court of Appeals.

domestic violence. Legal Aid has been part of the DVIC-SE since 2003, and the number of domestic violence survivors we serve from this location increases every year. Most recently, between 2011 and 2012, the number of clients we served at the DVIC-SE increased by 19 percent.

In addition to expressing our support for continued full funding for OVS, Legal Aid also encourages the Council to appropriate additional funds to establish a domestic violence hotline and a dedicated interpreter fund.

Legal Aid believes the establishment of a 24-hour domestic violence hotline would provide more survivors access to services that are currently inaccessible to the most vulnerable of our District residents, including survivors who are unable to go to the intake centers for various reasons such as disability and lack of transportation. The hotline would also serve as a valuable resource for survivors on weekends and holidays when the DVICs are closed.

Additional funding for interpreter services is also needed. As the Council knows well, the District's population is unique and diverse. Legal Aid regularly serves clients who have limited or no English proficiency. For immigrant survivors of domestic violence, the barriers to receiving assistance are numerous. I recently provided legal assistance to an Ethiopian survivor of domestic violence who came to the DVIC-SE seeking a CPO against her abusive spouse. My client had suffered abuse for a long time but was unaware of her rights or the services available to her. In addition, fear of being ostracized by her community contributed to her reluctance to initiate Court action. With the assistance of an Amharic interpreter, I was able to provide her with legal advice that helped her make decisions that enabled her to leave her abusive spouse. A dedicated interpreter fund for crime victims would alleviate some of the language barriers many domestic violence victims face and allow them to seek necessary services for their protection.

Through its support of the various legal, social, and community services provided to domestic violence victims, OVS enables victims to leave abusive relationships and to seek safety for themselves and their families. Legal Aid urges the Council to approve the 15 million dollar FY 2014 budget for OVS and to provide additional funding for the creation of a domestic violence hotline and a dedicated interpreter fund. Funding these two additional projects will expand access to services to the District's underserved populations and increase the ability of service providers to provide assistance to crime victims. Finally, on behalf of the domestic violence victims we represent, Legal Aid would like to thank Chairman Wells for his leadership on all of these issues, which not only heightened the focus on victim services but also ensured continued support for OVS.