

**Testimony on Agency Performance Oversight for the Office of Victim Services  
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety Performance**

**Council of the District of Columbia  
February 12, 2015, 10:00 a.m.**

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On behalf of the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia,<sup>1</sup> I submit this testimony to highlight the critical services to survivors of domestic violence that we are able to offer as a result of the funding that the Office of Victim Services (“OVS”) provides to Legal Aid.

OVS’s generous support of Legal Aid’s work at the Domestic Violence Intake Center in Southeast (“DVIC-SE”) allows us to serve to survivors of domestic violence in the District’s poorest neighborhoods. Located at United Medical Center (“UMC”), the DVIC-SE primarily services residents from Wards 7 and 8, East of the Anacostia River. There, Legal Aid lawyers seek to provide high quality, client-centered legal advice and representation to survivors in civil protection order cases and also in related child custody, divorce, and child support matters.

Consider Ms. Smith (name changed to protect her identity) as an example to illustrate the difference that our presence at the DVIC-SE can make on the individual lives of some of D.C.’s most vulnerable residents: She came to file for a civil protection order against Mr. Jones (name also changed), the father of her three children, because her relationship with Mr. Jones had become increasingly violent. In the worst and most recent incident that had occurred just the day before, Mr. Jones punched Ms. Smith in the face so hard that she lost vision in her left eye, which became bloodshot and bruised. Mr. Jones also pushed Ms. Smith down on some steps, punched her in the stomach, choked her with both hands, picked her up, and threw her over their couch; this all occurred in front of their three children, ranging in ages from one and a half to five years of age. Ms. Smith wanted to run but couldn’t because she had nowhere to go with her three children.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 eighty 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, housing, and public benefits. It also maintains an appellate advocacy project that litigates poverty law matters in the D.C. Court of Appeals. More information about Legal Aid can be found on our website, [www.LegalAidDC.org](http://www.LegalAidDC.org), and our blog, [www.MakingJusticeReal.org](http://www.MakingJusticeReal.org).

When Ms. Smith arrived at the DVIC-SE to file for a civil protection order, she met with a police officer who took a report. Ms. Smith then met with an advocate from the court who assisted her in making a safety plan, connected her to social services, and helped her narrate the recent incidents of violence in petition for a civil protection order.

Ms. Smith then met with me to receive free legal advice and representation. She was also able to meet with a medical forensic nurse examiner to photograph her black eye, thereby preserving this powerful evidence.

Ms. Smith then testified before a judge remotely via closed circuit television to obtain a temporary protection order. Finally, once her hearing concluded, she met with a representative from the Crime Victims Compensation program to relocate her and her children to shelter or safe housing. All of these critical services were available to Ms. Smith and are available to countless survivors daily at the DVIC in southeast.

For the last two years, the number of individuals like Ms. Smith taking advantage of these services at DVIC-SE has increased by 20%, and last year the same trend continued with an increase of 17%.

Legal Aid is particularly focused on supporting OVS's funding of the DVIC-SE because an overwhelming majority of victims of violence seeking services there are low or no-income, which is consistent with Legal Aid's mission. We also applaud OVS's leadership role in convening the Victim Assistance Network ("VAN"), which brings together a range of non-profit and government-based service providers to develop and ensure collaborative, client-centered best practices in serving victims of violence.

In conclusion, on behalf of the hundreds of low-income survivors of violence we represent at Legal Aid each year, and countless others who benefit from OVS's funding and work, we urge the Committee and the Council to continue to support the Office of Victim Services by funding OVS at \$18 million in Fiscal Year 2016.