

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

**Council of the District of Columbia
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On behalf of the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia,¹ I testify in support of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (“OVSJG”), which provides critical support for survivors of domestic violence in the District. With the support of OVSJG, Legal Aid provides legal services to the District’s survivors of domestic violence. Legal Aid partners with other members of the Victim Assistance Network to ensure that survivors receive holistic services that address their legal and other needs.

Because of the generous support Legal Aid receives through OVSJG, we are able to provide critically-needed legal services to low-income domestic violence survivors through our Domestic Violence Intake Center Southeast (“DVIC-SE”) Project, located in the United Medical Center. My colleagues and I represent survivors of domestic violence not only in Civil Protection Order (“CPO”) matters, but often also with their child custody, child support, visitation, or divorce/legal separation needs. Many of those who come to the DVIC-SE—and all of our clients—are low-income. While we serve survivors from all 8 Wards of the city, the DVIC-SE primarily serves residents from Wards 7 and 8, the two wards with the highest concentration of poverty in the District.

For many low-income survivors 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; speak to a therapist from the WENDT Center; and meet with a Legal Aid attorney to receive assistance with their CPO case and related legal matters. The DVIC-SE effectively serves as a “one-stop shop” for survivors of domestic violence. Legal Aid has been part of the DVIC-SE since 2003, and each year, we consistently see an increase in the number of applicants seeking legal services at the DVIC-SE.

I would like to share a brief story to highlight the important services that Legal Aid provides to survivors in the District. Recently, a young woman came to DVIC-SE after a very

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. More information about Legal Aid can be found on our website, www.LegalAidDC.org, and our blog, www.MakingJusticeReal.org.

violent attack by her child's father which resulted in severe injuries to her head and face. For purposes of this testimony, I will call her Charise Johnson. Ms. Johnson was traumatized, had difficulty speaking because of her injuries, and was very concerned about her safety and the safety of her child. Her abuser, whom I will call Charles Smith, was initially arrested, but he was eventually released pending the criminal trial, which was set for more than a year after the incident. She was understandably afraid for her safety.

Thankfully for Ms. Johnson, she found her way to the DVIC-SE. With the help of a Legal Aid attorney and the other DVIC-SE partners, she was able to find safe shelter and pursue a CPO against Mr. Smith. My colleague helped Ms. Johnson navigate various challenges and intimidations that arose during the course of the CPO case, including serving Mr. Smith with the court paperwork and supporting her during the long litigation process. She was forced to return to Court three additional times, because Mr. Smith kept finding ways to postpone the hearing. He tried to intimidate her during one hearing and did not appear for another. There were times when Ms. Johnson was overwhelmed and exhausted. On one occasion Ms. Johnson came late to a hearing, because she had worked late, had to get her child to school, and had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. On that day, my colleague was in Court fighting on her behalf to ensure that Ms. Johnson's case was not dismissed.

Ultimately, due in no small part to her strength and persistence, Ms. Johnson was able to get a one year CPO preventing Mr. Smith from harassing, assaulting, threatening, or stalking her and her child, ordering Mr. Smith not to contact her, and ordering him to stay 100 yards away from her at all times. Ms. Johnson still has scars from the violent assault, and she may still have to testify against Mr. Smith in the eventual criminal trial. But she knows that she has safety because of the CPO, and with that safety comes peace of mind. Her CPO will also allow her to access other resources such as relocation assistance from Crime Victims Compensation. The legal services that we provide ensure that citizens of the District are empowered to protect themselves against harm and to continue living their lives without fear.

Without the funding provided by OVSJG for the DVIC-SE, Ms. Johnson would likely not have been able to obtain a CPO or access the holistic and critical services provided at the DVIC-SE. The DVIC-SE is an invaluable resource for our rapidly increasing client population not only because it provides a myriad of services in one location, but also because it is a place where survivors can feel comfortable discussing their domestic violence related concerns. Especially given the recent discussions about cutting federal funding for victims under the Violence Against Women Act, Ms. Johnson's story is a reminder that maintaining local funding to assist survivors of domestic violence in obtaining safety and security is as urgent and important now as ever.

Finally, I note that due to the unique and diverse make-up of the District's population, many of our clients speak foreign languages ranging from the more common Spanish and Amharic languages to the less well known languages such as Ashanti Twi. There is a significant immigrant population for whom English is a second language. Legal Aid provides legal services to low-income District residents regardless of the language they speak or their immigration status. Given the recent and constant changes in immigration policy and the current climate in Washington D.C., we anticipate an increase in immigration related threats facing our client population, and our attorneys have already seen evidence of this over the past few weeks. A

colleague is currently in the midst of a case in which the opposing counsel has threatened to report our client to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) if she goes through with her request for a CPO. The support of the D.C. Council and the valuable funding that OVSJG provides is even more vital as these survivors face increased threats and intimidation and require the services of Legal Aid attorneys more than ever.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and share with you Legal Aid’s positive experiences working with OVSJG to provide support and services to survivors of domestic violence.