

**Testimony of Julia Eve Preston
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**Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia:
Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding the Office of Victim Services and Justice
Grants**

February 8, 2018

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 domestic violence survivors in the District. With OVSJG’s support, Legal Aid is able to provide much needed legal services to domestic violence survivors in the District spanning from legal advice on an issue to full representation. 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 Victims Representation Project out of the Domestic Violence Intake Center Southeast (“DVIC-SE”), which is located in the United Medical Center. My colleagues and I advise and represent domestic violence survivors not only in Civil Protection Order (“CPO”) matters, but often also with their related family law matters such as child custody, child support, visitation, and/or divorce/legal separation. 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 District, 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 domestic violence survivors, 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 the Crime Victims Compensation Program; receive safety planning and other support services from SAFE (“Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment”); and meet with a Legal Aid attorney to receive legal assistance with their CPO case and related legal matters. The DVIC-SE effectively serves as a “one-stop shop” for domestic violence survivors. 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. Between 2014 and 2017, the number of applicants seeking our services at the DVIC-SE increased from 294 to 352—an increase of twenty percent (20%).

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.

I would like to share a brief story to highlight the important services that Legal Aid provides to survivors in the District and, by extension, why OVSJG's support is so important. Recently, a mother and Iraq war veteran came to the DVIC-SE after her husband attacked her and tried to run away with her young son (who was not his child). She was traumatized by this violence at the hands of someone she trusted. Her trauma was made even more acute by the fact that she suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD") due to her time in the military serving our country. The abuser was arrested, but he was eventually released pending a criminal trial, which was set for many months after the incident. At the DVIC-SE, the survivor was able to petition for a CPO and connect with a Legal Aid attorney who would be by her side over the next five months of litigation leading up to the criminal trial. Although she obtained a Temporary Protection Order ("TPO") requiring the abuser not to contact her or come near her (which was extended while the criminal trial was pending), the abuser continued to come to her home, call her on the phone, and attempt to pass messages to her through mutual contacts. The survivor was, understandably, intimidated, scared, and, at times, on the verge of giving up her request for a CPO and her participation in the criminal case. Fortunately, her Legal Aid attorney was able to counsel her on all of her options each time a new and more difficult situation arose. The Legal Aid attorney helped the survivor navigate the complicated relationship between the civil and criminal systems and worked closely with her and the United States Attorney's Office to add additional charges in the criminal case due to the TPO violations, which ultimately led to the abuser's conviction. Finally, because of the persistence of the attorney and the strength of the survivor, she was able to get a one-year CPO preventing her abuser from harassing, assaulting, threatening, or stalking her and her child, ordering the abuser not to contact the survivor, and ordering him to stay 100 yards away from her at all times. Her CPO will also allow her to access other resources such as relocation assistance from the Crime Victims Compensation Program, giving her piece of mind following the abuser's multiple violations of court orders. The legal services that we provide ensure that citizens of the District of Columbia 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, this particular survivor would not have been able to obtain a CPO or access the holistic and critical services provided at the DVIC-SE. She was also able to work extremely closely with SAFE throughout the duration of this case. The DVIC-SE is an invaluable resource for our rapidly increasing client population, because it provides a myriad of services in one location; it is also a venue where survivors can feel comfortable discussing their domestic violence related concerns. We ask that the DC Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role OVSJG plays in the funding of core services for domestic violence survivors.

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 services to low-income District residents regardless of the language they speak or their immigration status. We noted in our testimony last year a growing concern that, given the recent and constant changes in immigration policy, we anticipated an increase in immigration related threats towards our client population. Unfortunately, this concern has proven legitimate over the past year, as we have witnessed abusers threatening and attempting to report our clients to Immigration and

Customs Enforcement countless times. This, of course, does not take into account the survivors who never come forward to seek help or our services due to immigration related concerns. 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 victims of domestic violence.