

**Testimony of Jamie Sparano
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Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**

**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 6, 2019

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 holistic legal services to domestic violence survivors in the District, ranging from legal advice on a discrete legal issue to full representation in court for Civil Protection Order trials, related custody matters, and more. Legal Aid also partners with other members of the Victim Assistance Network to ensure that survivors receive holistic services that address their legal and other needs.

Before continuing with our testimony, I would like to note that Legal Aid is also the recipient of a significant amount of funding from both the Access to Justice Grants program and the Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program, and that Legal Aid lawyers are beneficiaries of the Poverty Lawyers Loan Repayment Assistance Program. Each of these programs is administered professionally by the D.C. Bar Foundation with funding from OVSJG. The funds play a critical role in Legal Aid’s ability to provide high-quality legal services to survivors of domestic violence and others living in poverty in the District. However, our testimony today will focus on the specific needs of survivors of domestic violence and the vital role that OVSJG plays in making key supports available.

The generous support Legal Aid receives through OVSJG enables us to offer much needed assistance to low-income domestic violence survivors through our Domestic Violence Victims Representation Project at 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 divorce. In

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.” Over the last 87 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 areas of housing, family law, public benefits, immigration, and consumer protection. More information about Legal Aid can be obtained from our website, www.LegalAidDC.org, and our blog, www.MakingJusticeReal.org.

addition, we are able to identify other legal needs for our clients – such as immigration and public benefits issues – and refer them to colleagues either at Legal Aid or at other providers within the Victim Legal Network. Many of those who come to the DVIC-SE – and all of Legal Aid’s clients – are low-income. While we serve survivors from all wards of the District, the DVIC-SE primarily serves residents from Wards 7 and 8, the two wards with the highest concentration of poverty.

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 shelter housing 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 2018, the number of applicants seeking our services at the DVIC-SE increased from 294 in 2014 to 357 in 2018—an increase of twenty percent (20%). In total, the DVIC-SE served over 3,300 people in 2018.

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. Ana Mwangi (whose name we have changed to protect her identity) came to the DVIC-SE after her abuser held her at gunpoint, threatened to shoot her, and sexually assaulted her. Coming forward to file for a CPO was especially challenging for Ms. Mwangi. She is an immigrant, and her work authorization had expired, so she relied on her abuser for a place to live and financial support for herself and her infant daughter. She did not know how she would survive on her own, and she was terrified of what would happen if she went to Court. Yet, Ms. Mwangi decided that she could not risk her safety and her daughter’s safety any longer.

At the DVIC-SE, Ms. Mwangi was able to petition for a CPO and connect with a Legal Aid attorney who would be by her side as she prepared to face her abuser in court. Although she obtained a Temporary Protection Order (“TPO”) requiring the abuser not to contact her or come near her, he continued to harass her, once even chasing her down the street until a kind taxi driver stopped and let Ms. Mwangi into his car. When Ms. Mwangi went with police to retrieve her belongings from her abuser, he refused to let them inside. He was determined to make her life as difficult as possible. Fortunately, her Legal Aid attorney was able to counsel her on all of her options each time a new situation arose. Finally, because of her attorney’s advocacy and her strength, Ms. Mwangi 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 her, and ordering him to stay 100 yards away from her at all times. After receiving her CPO, Ms. Mwangi shared that she had felt unsafe and distrustful throughout the process until she met with Legal Aid and had an attorney stand up with her in court. Then, she knew she was safe.

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 and by Legal Aid. 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, more conveniently located for residents of Wards 7 and 8. It is also a venue where survivors can feel comfortable discussing their domestic violence-related concerns.

OVSJG's support for holistic services also benefitted Ms. Mwangi, as a Legal Aid attorney was able to help her obtain public benefits and improve her financial stability. But for survivors like Ms. Mwangi, one of the biggest challenges after leaving an abuser is finding housing. The need for temporary and permanent housing for domestic violence survivors is pressing, and unfortunately that need sometimes goes unmet. Short-term safe housing offered to survivors may not even last the duration of a CPO case, and finding affordable long-term housing options can take time. When leaving an abuser, survivors have to worry about court hearings, child care, income, and safety; concerns about having a roof over their heads should not be on that list. Without sufficient resources, survivors may have no choice but to return to their abusers for shelter. The support of the D.C. Council and the valuable funding that OVSJG provides is vital as survivors facing the threat of violence need safe places to live.

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. We ask that the D.C. Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role OVSJG plays in the funding of core services for domestic violence survivors.