

**Testimony of Jamie Sparano
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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**

January 27, 2022

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia¹ submits testimony 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 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 (“CPO”) trials, related custody matters, and more. We also 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. In particular, Legal Aid partners with other members of the Victim Assistance Network to ensure that survivors receive holistic services.

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.

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.” Legal Aid is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. Over the last 90 years, Legal Aid staff and volunteers have been making justice real – in individual and systemic ways – for tens of thousands of persons living in poverty in the District. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal justice system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. More information about Legal Aid can be obtained from our website, www.LegalAidDC.org, and our blog, www.MakingJusticeReal.org.

Historically, the generous support Legal Aid receives through OVSJG has enabled 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”). At the DVIC-SE, we have been able to connect with survivors in person and provide on-the-spot legal advice as they began the process of leaving abusive relationships. Since the pandemic began, OVSJG has supported us in finding alternate ways to serve the community remotely. With COVID-19 came a marked rise in domestic violence coupled with reduced access to in-person services, and we continued to see these effects through 2021. Many of our clients found themselves unable to file court cases on their own due to limited internet access and lack of technology. Legal Aid has partnered with Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment (“DC SAFE”) and other legal services providers to ensure that we are still on call and available to survivors by telephone just like we would have been in person at the DVIC-SE, whether they are seeking representation or just need help filing a case online. Through these efforts, with the support of OVSJG, we provided advice or representation to 329 survivors in CPO cases in FY 2021.

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. Ashley Clark (whose name we have changed to protect her identity) was referred to us by SAFE after her abusive boyfriend posted a photograph of a gun on social media and threatened to shoot her. Ms. Clark and her abuser had a two-month-old child together, and her abuser’s violent behavior had been escalating ever since the baby was born. Ms. Clark feared what her abuser might do next and worried about how to keep her child safe from harm. Thankfully, she was able to connect with a Legal Aid attorney who guided her as she took steps to obtain a CPO and keep her abuser out of her life.

When Ms. Clark petitioned the court for a CPO, her abuser seemed determined to make the process as difficult as possible. He evaded the police’s attempts to serve him with court paperwork but continued to contact Ms. Clark with threatening and harassing messages. After several stressful weeks and multiple continuances in the case, a family member finally located Ms. Clark’s abuser and served him. The next time Ms. Clark appeared in court, she was able to obtain a CPO. With Legal Aid by her side, she bravely testified about the threats and abuse she endured at the hands of her child’s father and she expressed her fears to the court. As a result of the recently-passed Intrafamily Offenses and Anti-Stalking Orders Amendment Act of 2020, Ms. Clark’s CPO will provide protection for her and her child for two years.

After obtaining her CPO, Ms. Clark still had questions about how to move forward and support herself and her child. Legal Aid was there to advise Ms. Clark on next steps, including how to apply for public benefits and request child support. With those options available, Ms. Clark felt a sense of security and an ability to remain independent of her abuser. Without the funding provided by OVSJG, this particular survivor would not have been able to obtain a CPO or access the holistic and critical services provided by Legal Aid.

We have noted in past testimony that one of the biggest challenges survivors face after leaving an abuser is finding housing. This year, we reiterate that 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. We also recognize the importance of counseling and therapy services as survivors attempt to move forward and begin healing. The need is greater now than ever, as the pandemic has taken a toll on mental health as well. 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 and help to recover from the trauma they have experienced.

Conclusion

Legal Aid began serving survivors at the DVIC-SE in 2003 and we are grateful that OVSJG has helped us be a resource to survivors for so many years. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and share 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.