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***Testimony of Emily Grau
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***Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia***

***Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding Office of Victim Services and Justice
Grants***

February 10, 2023

Legal Aid of the District of Columbia¹ submits the following 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 provides legal services to domestic violence survivors in the District, ranging from advice on discrete legal issues 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, housing, and public benefits issues – and refer them to colleagues either at Legal Aid or at other providers. In particular, Legal Aid partners with

¹ Legal Aid 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.

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 Initiative 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 individuals and families 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 allows 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"). In December 2022, the DVIC-SE's physical location re-opened at the Anacostia Professional Building in Ward 8. Legal Aid attorneys have been staffing the DVIC-SE since its reopening, allowing us to meet with survivors in person and provide on-the-spot legal advice. The DVIC-SE is an invaluable resource for our client population because it provides a myriad of services in one convenient location, effectively serving as a "one-stop shop" for survivors. Additionally, Legal Aid continues to partner with Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment ("DC SAFE") and other service providers to connect with survivors remotely, allowing us to offer legal assistance to individuals who may be unable to visit 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, and, by extension, why OVSJG's support is so important. Rebecca Carey (whose name we have changed to protect her identity) was referred to us by SAFE after her boyfriend beat her with a belt, punched her, and held a knife to her neck. Fearing for her safety, Ms. Carey fled the home with her eight-month-old child.

Through our remote assistance project, Ms. Carey was able to connect with a Legal Aid attorney, who guided her as she took steps to obtain a CPO. When Ms. Carey's boyfriend began sending her threatening text messages – including images of a person pointing a knife at a baby's head – Ms. Carey's Legal Aid attorney assisted her with supplementing her CPO petition to include threats. Eventually, the parties appeared in court. With the assistance of her Legal Aid attorney, Ms. Carey bravely testified about the extensive abuse that she endured at the hands of her child's father. The judge granted Ms. Carey's CPO, which will provide protection for her and her child for the next two years.

After assisting with her CPO hearing, Legal Aid was able to continue supporting Ms. Carey as she started a new chapter. Because Ms. Carey fled her home to escape the abuse, she needed resources in order to remain independent from her abuser. Legal Aid helped Ms. Carey obtain funding to replace her child's stroller and crib, which Ms. Carey was forced to leave behind when she fled the abuse. Legal Aid also connected Ms. Carey with counseling services for survivors of domestic violence. With this support, Ms. Carey was able to feel a sense of safety and security. Without the funding provided by OVSJG, this particular survivor would not have been able to obtain a CPO or access the holistic 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 safe housing. This year, we again reiterate that the need for temporary and permanent housing for domestic violence survivors continues to be pressing and further note that we are seeing less available housing for survivors than ever, leaving many with this critical need unmet. Unfortunately, the 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 abusive situation, survivors have to worry about court hearings, childcare, 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.

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 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.