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**Testimony of Inka Boehm  
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**Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Public Hearing Regarding:**

**Bill 25-0344  
“Office of Unified Communications Transparency and Accuracy Amendment Act of  
2023”**

**October 5, 2023**

Legal Aid of the District of Columbia<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony regarding Bill 25-0344, “Office of Unified Communications Transparency and Accuracy Amendment Act of 2023”. Legal Aid supports the bill because our clients have had poor and harmful experiences when seeking a 911 emergency response, such as: receiving no answer, being put on hold, getting unrequested callbacks-- which can endanger a person in a violent situation --and having a call taker unable to assist in Domestic Violence situations. We also have concerns with the ability of people to text for help. These experiences demonstrate an urgent need to reform the OUC immediately and to pass this legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 91 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](http://www.LegalAidDC.org).

## **Domestic Violence Survivors Provide a Valuable Perspective**

Legal Aid's Domestic Violence/Family Law Unit attorneys work with domestic violence survivors, helping them petition for Civil Protection Orders and providing ongoing representation. Our attorneys staff the Domestic Violence Intake Center at the D.C. Superior Courthouse and its satellite office at the Anacostia Professional Building as well. We have also reopened our Big Chair and Northwest offices for general walk-in intake and have continued to receive online and telephone intake requests for assistance. We meet with survivors of domestic violence daily who are taking the steps to leave violent relationships and situations to find safety. Oftentimes those steps begin with a call to 911. Through our work, we see the persistent challenges that await survivors who are fleeing violence and seeking protection. As a result, we can provide useful insight into the impact that Office of Unified Communication's (OUC's) failed responses have on domestic violence survivors.

## **The District of Columbia Experiences Higher than Average Rates of Domestic Violence**

Every minute, approximately 20 people in the United States of America experience physical abuse from an intimate partner. This is the equivalent of more than 10 million people each year.<sup>2</sup> In the District of Columbia, 40% of women and 25% of men will experience domestic violence in their lifetime; these rates are higher than the national average.<sup>3</sup> The number of District residents experiencing domestic violence is staggering, and many of those experiencing violence will call 911 for help. When those requests for help go unanswered, whether because the line keeps ringing, they are hung up on, or no help is sent following a call, people can face more serious violence and even death without a sufficient emergency response.

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<sup>2</sup> *Statistics*, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), <https://ncadv.org/statistics> (citing *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report*, Nat's Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Domestic Violence Prevention (Nov. 2011), [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs\\_report2010-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> *Key Facts about Domestic Violence in D.C.*, D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence, <https://www.dccadv.org/press/#:~:text=Prominence%20of%20Domestic%20Violence%20in%20DC&text=40%25%20of%20women%20and%2025,higher%20than%20the%20national%20average>

We have also noticed that 911's failures impact District residents' willingness to seek help in the future because of their lack of trust in the emergency response system. For domestic violence survivors like our clients, it takes an average of 7 attempts to leave a violent relationship before a survivor leaves permanently. In our own practice and work with survivors, we see how unreliable 911 operations have resulted in a crisis in confidence for District residents. Fewer and fewer survivors are willing to pick up the phone and call 911 to begin with. By the time clients reach out to Legal Aid, we are focused on helping them move forward, safety planning, and case planning, but we have noticed a rise in clients complaining about 911 issues they experience prior to connecting with our services.

### **The Committee Should Strengthen the Bill Based on Legal Aid's Client Experiences**

Legal Aid supports the intent of the proposed bill to improve OUC operations and hold the Office accountable for its promised improvements, but we offer the following recommendations and comments to improve OUC's response to domestic violence survivors.

#### OUC Should Hire More 911 Call Center Staff

Our client experiences demonstrate a need for more 911 call staff. Our clients have reported calling 911 and being unable to get through to anyone. This is problematic for obvious and immediate safety reasons. But also, survivors of domestic violence are regularly asked if they called 911, if the police came out and took a report, or if an arrest was made. When the answer to these questions is no, more barriers are raised against survivors finding safety and security.

We have also heard from clients that there have been times when a 911 call taker did not answer their call, and when the caller hung up, they received a call back at a later time. Calling anyone back, unprompted or without permission, while they are experiencing a violent interaction can be dangerous, even lethal. This is especially true for domestic violence victims whose perpetrators may not know where they are or that they have a phone, or who are calling from a shared phone. If OUC must retain an automatic call back response, we would highly recommend making it optional for callers to select yes or no, if they cannot be connected with 911 immediately.

Other Legal Aid clients have reported being put on hold by 911. In one case, a client called because her boyfriend had pointed a gun at her. She called 911 while his attention was turned elsewhere but she was put on hold. By the time she was taken off hold, he had returned, and she could not share necessary information.

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### Answering Domestic Violence Calls Should be Part of Regular Training for Call Center Staff

Our clients' experiences also demonstrate the need for additional training for 911 operators on domestic violence. Clients have reported speaking with 911 call takers that appear to not be trained on how to handle calls with individuals experiencing domestic violence. Our clients have reported 911 calls ending before the call taker ensures that the caller has an immediate safety plan. They have reported being told that MPD could not be on the scene for over an hour and that if they were not in immediate physical danger, 911 could not offer them assistance.

Domestic violence survivors often call 911 when they are in a crisis, and they feel their life is in danger. Domestic violence situations can and do escalate quickly. We believe that 911 callers would benefit from training on how to quickly assist callers to ensure they are in a safe place where they can wait for police assistance or talked to about how to get to safety in other dangerous situations if there is nowhere to wait.<sup>4</sup>

### It is Imperative that OUC and MPD Coordinate More Effectively

Stories from our clients also demonstrate the need for additional coordination between the call center and MPD district stations. Many of our clients have reported being passed back and forth from 911 to their district station with no results. After being told by their districts they do not dispatch and do not take reports over the phone, most clients give up.

## **Conclusion**

Legal Aid supports the proposed legislation and agrees that transparency and data collection are important. However, survivors of domestic violence in the District of Columbia cannot wait for the data to be collected and analyzed to see change. We have seen the impact that the failures of 911's emergency response has on survivors of domestic violence and urge the Council to explore these concerns when considering this bill and to work with OUC representatives to identify additional efforts that should be taken in the immediate and the long term to improve operations to ensure survivors and other District residents get the emergency help they need.

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 2, *911 Emergency Communications Center*, The Blueprint for Safety, Praxis International, <https://praxisinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/BlueprintChapter2.pdf>.