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**Testimony of Caroline Fehr
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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 24, 2024

Legal Aid DC¹ 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 other members of the Victim Assistance Network to ensure that survivors receive holistic services.

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

¹ Legal Aid DC 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 92 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.

lawyers are beneficiaries of the Poverty Lawyers Loan Repayment Assistance Program. Each of these programs are 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"). Legal Aid has staffed the DVIC-SE's physical location since its reopening at the Anacostia Professional Building in Ward 8 in December 2022. Previously, Legal Aid staffed the DVIC-SE at its former location at United Medical Center from 2003 until its closure in 2020. Legal Aid attorneys staff the DVIC-SE four days a week, which allows 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 in person. Through these efforts, with the support of OVSJG, we provided advice or representation to over 300 survivors in FY 2023.

Legal Aid would like to share a brief story to highlight the important services that we provide to survivors in the District with OVSJG's support, and, by extension, why OVSJG's support is critical. Anna Green, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy, was referred to Legal Aid through our remote assistance project after calling the DC Victim Hotline staffed by DC SAFE. Ms. Green endured years of physical and emotional abuse from her husband, who repeatedly forced his way back into her life every time Ms. Green managed to get away. When her husband was released from jail in 2023, he called her non-stop, sent threatening text messages, and repeatedly called the police to have them conduct welfare checks throughout all hours of the day and night. Legal Aid worked closely with Ms. Green to gather evidence of the abuse from her electronic devices and file a comprehensive Petition for a CPO. When Ms. Green's husband could not be located to serve him with the Petition, Legal Aid helped Ms. Green file a Motion for Alternative Service so the case could move forward. Ms. Green eventually obtained a default CPO.

Unfortunately, Ms. Green's case did not stop there. Throughout the CPO proceedings, Ms. Green's husband contacted her incessantly, threatening to harm her, and repeatedly pressuring her to let him see their child, despite the Temporary Protection Order and later final CPO. Ms. Green's husband then filed for divorce and, in an attempt to further

harass and control her, asked that Ms. Green be ordered to pay him spousal support. Legal Aid helped Ms. Green respond to her husband's claim and file her own counterclaim requesting a divorce as well as an award of custody and support for their child-in-common. Legal Aid represented Ms. Green in her case and after several difficult and contentious hearings, Ms. Green's husband stopped participating in the case and the Court proceeded in his absence. Ms. Green was awarded an absolute divorce, without having to pay any financial support to her now ex-husband, sole legal and physical custody, and a permanent child support order.

Because she endured years of violence and coercive control, Ms. Green suffered from PTSD and depression. She experienced an extreme amount of stress leading up to each court date and the resolution of her case. Legal Aid worked with Ms. Green to ensure that she felt prepared, supported, and heard so that she could achieve her goal of safety for herself and her family. Legal Aid's work with Ms. Green and other survivors of domestic violence would not be possible without the support of OVSJG. OVSJG recognizes that many survivors have complex legal needs, both immediate and long term. Legal Aid is proud to work with OVSJG to assist survivors with a variety of legal issues, including protection orders, divorce, custody, and child support.

As we have noted in our testimony in years past, one of the biggest challenges survivors face after leaving an abusive partner 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, over twenty years ago. 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.