



[www.legalaiddc.org](http://www.legalaiddc.org)  
1331 H Street, NW  
Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 628-1161

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**Testimony of Megan Browder  
Legal Director, Systemic Advocacy and Law Reform  
Legal Aid DC**

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

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

**January 29, 2025**

Legal Aid DC<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony in support of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (“OVSJG”). We thank the Council for its continued support of – and investment into – OVSJG, which allows Legal Aid to provide legal services to some of our most vulnerable District neighbors. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and share with you Legal Aid’s positive experiences working with OVSJG.

As the wealth gap in the District continues to grow,<sup>2</sup> access to free civil legal services becomes ever more important. Legal Aid receives significant funding from OVSJG in the form of direct grants and indirectly through the DC Bar Foundation. With OVSJG’s support, Legal Aid provided legal services to over 10,000 people last year, including full representation in more than 1,700 cases. Legal Aid has also invested time and personnel to address systemic problems that will benefit everyone involved in the civil legal system. Below are just a few examples of how OVSJG funding has positively impacted District residents.

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<sup>1</sup>Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. 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 legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit [www.LegalAidDC.org](http://www.LegalAidDC.org).

<sup>2</sup> Tazra Mitchell, *Poverty Reduction Stalled While Racial and Income Inequality Persisted in 2023*, D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, <https://tinyurl.com/yzpd5jte>.

The District is confronting a housing crisis: increasing rents and a decreasing supply of affordable housing predictably led to increased evictions.<sup>3</sup> Keeping people and families in their homes promotes safer, more stable neighborhoods and is critical to keeping families together.

Legal Aid’s 31 housing attorneys and staff – our largest unit – saw a 54% increase in client intake applications related to evictions in 2024. OVSJG’s support allows Legal Aid housing attorneys to staff the Landlord and Tenant Legal Assistance Network (“LTLAN”), a single intake hotline where low-income District residents can get free legal information, advice, or legal representation by phone or online. Attorneys are also on site two days a week at D.C. Superior Court to provide same-day assistance and limited representation for low-income unrepresented defendants in an eviction action. Through the LTLAN and courthouse staffing projects Legal Aid represented almost 300 people in 2024.

In collaboration with other legal services providers, Legal Aid has also relaunched the Housing Right to Counsel Project, which guarantees counsel for tenants with subsidies facing eviction based on allegations that they violated their lease. Through Right to Counsel, Legal Aid worked with dozens of law firms to guarantee representation for over 100 tenants with subsidies – a vital service because residents risk losing their subsidy if they are evicted. Right to Counsel, LTLAN, and courthouse staffing help to close the representation gap in Landlord Tenant Court, where 95% of landlords have attorneys, but only 15% of tenants are represented by counsel.

OVSJG’s support also funds Legal Aid attorneys who enforce District laws that require safe, well-maintained housing for all District residents. In 2024, Legal Aid and Arnold & Porter reached a settlement on behalf of tenants of Marbury Plaza that would provide over \$800,000 in payments and other protections. The tenants in Marbury Plaza, which has over 650 units, have lived for too long in unsanitary and unsafe conditions including leaks, mold, non-working elevators, and a lack of basic housing utilities like heat, hot water, and air conditioning. When Marbury Plaza’s owners went bankrupt, Legal Aid stepped in to represent the tenants so that they could receive some compensation for the horrific conditions that they have had to endure for years. And, when the owner failed to live up to the terms of the consent decree, Legal Aid’s appellate team acted as amicus to advocate for the tenants.

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Wiener, *A ‘perfect storm’ of problems pushes D.C. toward full-blown housing crisis*, The Wash. Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/09/25/dc-affordable-housing-crisis/>.

Legal Aid also works with low-income homeowners facing foreclosure to help them keep their homes, closing nearly 120 such cases in 2024. D.C. has one of the highest rates of foreclosures,<sup>4</sup> and OVSJG funding supports the Council's goals of preserving home ownership, particularly for elderly or vulnerable residents. In 2024, Legal Aid's consumer attorneys helped many homeowners like Francine Milton. Ms. Milton, a Ward 7 resident, came to Legal Aid after trying to navigate a foreclosure on her own. Legal Aid attorneys helped her apply and receive a loan modification, which took her out of foreclosure, kept her home affordable, and let her remain in her home with her family. Preserving home ownership creates economic opportunity through generational wealth and relieves pressure on an already stretched rental housing market.

OVSJG funding also supports Legal Aid's work with survivors of domestic violence. In 2024, Legal Aid conducted almost 700 intakes and closed 35% more cases than in 2023. Legal Aid has staffed the Domestic Violence Intake Center Southeast ("DVIC-SE") for over twenty years. The DVIC-SE provides a single access point for domestic violence survivors to receive legal help, counseling services, safety planning, and speak to law enforcement. Legal Aid attorneys are on site at DVIC-SE four days a week, providing on-the-spot legal advice and assistance.

Legal Aid also continued its partnership with Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment ("DC SAFE") to connect remotely with survivors who are unable to meet in person. Charisse Smith\* is one of the clients referred to Legal Aid by DC SAFE. Ms. Smith is 19 years old and has cycled out of foster care and homelessness for the past 3 years. Shortly after moving in with her boyfriend, he attacked her, pushing her, dragging her by the hair and arms and, ultimately, kicking her out of the apartment. Ms. Smith was again homeless without income, benefits, or access to her medication. Legal Aid attorneys represented Ms. Smith to get a civil protection order ("CPO"). Ms. Smith's attorneys helped her apply for emergency benefits and worked closely with her social worker to provide information and ensure that she was able to receive replacement medication, obtained housing resources and support, and had active Medicaid coverage. In the CPO case, Ms. Smith was granted a CPO with the terms she requested, including not just stay-away and no contact provisions but also reimbursement for the property the abuser had destroyed. The comprehensive advocacy and support for Ms. Smith as she navigated the process of leaving an abusive situation was made possible by the funding provided through OVSJG.

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<sup>4</sup> See Nora Epstein, Foreclosure Rates for All 50 States in March 2024, <https://www.sofi.com/learn/content/foreclosure-rates-for-50-states/>

\* Name changed for anonymity.

One of the biggest challenges survivors face after leaving an abusive partner is finding safe housing. On top of the general housing crisis across the District, survivors face additional hurdles. Their immediate and critical need for housing is an additional worry on top of their safety, multiple court hearings, childcare, and sudden changes in income. Affordable and available housing is essential to provide survivors options so that they are not left with a choice between homelessness or returning to an abuser. 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.

These are just a few of the thousands of people that Legal Aid has been able to help in 2024 with OVSJG funding. Legal Aid is grateful to the Council for its continued support of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants – we could not do our work and serve our clients without this funding. We ask that the D.C. Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role that OVSJG plays in the funding of core services for many District residents.