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2018 Budget Oversight Hearing: Judiciary and Public Safety

April 12, 2017

Testimony of Jackie Love-Baker, Attorney

Director of Development, DC Volunteer Lawyers Project

Good afternoon. My name is Jackie Love-Baker, and I am the Director of Development at the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project. First, I would like to thank Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor Donahue for continuing to invest in services for victims in Washington, DC by proposing an increase in the OVS Budget for 2018. An increase will help us fill the current gaps in legal, housing and counseling services for domestic violence survivors. Access to these services is critical to help victims escape abuse and find safety and stability for themselves and their children.

The mission of the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project is to recruit, train and support a network of volunteer lawyers to provide high-quality, *pro bono* legal services to low-income domestic violence victims and at-risk children in Washington, DC. We use an innovative and cost-effective volunteer lawyer model, which allows us to leverage hundreds of volunteer lawyers with a small number of experienced supervising attorneys. In 2016, our **225** volunteer lawyers donated over **14,000** hours to more than **600** victims and children residing in all wards of the city.

In one of the first steps in breaking free from violence, we help victims obtain civil protection orders. Our lawyers are trained to seek numerous forms of relief for our clients, including temporary custody of children, child support, safe visitation arrangements, and orders for the abuser to vacate the family home to protect the victim and her children from becoming homeless. We accept cases from SAFE which conducts intakes of clients seeking protection orders at the Domestic Violence Intake Center. We also accept cases from our weekly Domestic Violence Resource Clinic, which we operate with the District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH) and My Sister's Place. At the clinic, victims can access legal, housing and counseling all in one

location. We provided representation in over **300** civil protection order cases last year.

However, according to SAFE's statistics, over half of the victims who requested an attorney did not receive one.

This is unfortunate, given that protection orders substantially decrease domestic violence. Last week, a Wall Street Journal cited a new study by Dr. Logan of the University of Kentucky School of Medicine. The study showed that threats of harm or death declined dramatically after women received protective orders, from **83%** to **19%**.¹

Other studies have found that an attorney increases the likelihood that the court will grant the protection order. Our own attorneys have a success rate in court of over **90%**. Civil legal services also provides an access point to other social support services, and a sense of safety and empowerment for the victim which can help her move forward in establishing emotional and financial independence. These benefits increase the likelihood that a victim will leave her abusive partner permanently.² If we were to receive additional funding, we could help many more victims to obtain civil protection orders.

We also represent victims in divorce, custody and child support cases to help clients permanently and safely separate from their abusers. These cases can take hundreds of hours of volunteer time and last for a year or more, but helping our clients secure custody of their children and ongoing child support is essential to ensuring that they do not return to an abusive

¹ Wall Street Journal, In Deeds (April 7, 2017).

² NY School of Law, Supporting Survivors: The Economic Benefits of Providing Civil Legal Assistance to Survivors of Domestic Violence (July 2015).

relationship. We represented almost **90** survivors in these cases in 2016, but we know from our significant waitlist that this remains a pressing need in our community. We also know that providing representation in these cases is an effective means of keeping victims safe. A recent study conducted by Iowa Legal Services found that domestic violence survivors who received civil legal representation not only reported a substantial decrease in violence but also “an increase in monthly income and a decrease in the number of resources used.”³ By investing in providing resources for domestic violence survivors, we are not only keeping victims safe, but we are also effectively using our community’s resources.

I would like to conclude by thanking Chairman Allen for holding today’s hearing and thanking Director Garcia for her excellent work supporting victims and survivors in our city. I would also like to thank the committee for their commitment to victim services here in DC, especially during this time when we are facing a potential decrease in funding for legal services and victim services on the federal level.

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³ The Longer Term Influence of Civil Legal Services on Battered Women, Iowa Legal Services.