



DC VOLUNTEER
LAWYERS PROJECT



Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants Performance Oversight Hearing

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**Testimony of
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Good afternoon. My name is Karen Barker Marcou, and I am the Executive Director of the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project. The mission of DCVLP 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. DCVLP uses an innovative and cost-effective volunteer lawyer model, which allows us to leverage a large network of hundreds of volunteer lawyers with a small number of experienced supervising attorneys. DCVLP provides its volunteer attorneys with everything they need to provide exceptional client service, including online and live specialized training, mentoring and in-court supervision by an experienced Supervising Attorney, an online pleadings library, professional liability insurance, and reimbursement for litigation costs. Using this model, DCVLP attorneys are able provide legal services to hundreds of victims and children each year from all wards of the city on a relatively modest budget while ensuring high-quality representation. In 2017, **250** volunteer lawyers provided over **17,000** hours of free legal help -- valued at over **\$4** million -- in just one year.

DCVLP has received funding from OVS-JG since 2011, and our current OVS-JG grant supports approximately half of our domestic violence program. In our domestic violence program, we help our clients to obtain civil protection orders or stay away orders, which is one of first steps in breaking free from violence. DCVLP lawyers are trained to seek numerous forms of relief for our clients through the protection order process, including temporary custody of children, child support, safe visitation arrangements, and, orders for the abuser to vacate the common residence to protect the victim and her children from becoming homeless.

We also represent our clients 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 abusive relationships.

Although it is not funded by OVS-JG, we also operate a weekly community-based Domestic Violence Walk-In Resource Clinic with two OVS-JG funded organizations, DASH and My Sisters Place. At this clinic, clients can access legal, housing counseling and other support services to help them leave abusive relationships.

To illustrate the importance of our services, I would like to tell you about our client Vanessa. Vanessa is the mother of 3 young children. She was referred to us by DC SAFE after she filed for a protection order. Vanessa's abuser had hit her, held a loaded gun to her head for five minutes and threatened to kill her multiple times. Vanessa was terrified that this time her abuser was going to follow through on his threats and leave her children without a mother. DCVLP attorneys represented her in court and after introducing text messages as evidence and presenting witnesses to corroborate Vanessa's story, she was granted a protection order against her abuser and temporary custody of her three children with no visitation for her abuser. The DCVLP lawyers also connected her with the Crime Victim Compensation Fund, which provided funds for Vanessa to relocate to a new, confidential location.

In 2017, with the support of OVS-JG and other funders, DCVLP helped hundreds of survivors of domestic violence achieve safety and independence by handling **325** civil protection order cases

and **100** custody, divorce and child support cases. In both types of cases, we achieved a success rate of **95%** or better. At our Domestic Violence Walk-In Resource Clinic, we served **418** victims with housing, counseling and legal services all in one convenient and low barrier setting.

In 2017, we plan to help even more survivors break free from violence, but we could not achieve this without the support of OVS-JG. Our working relationship with OVS-JG has been excellent, and our grant officers have been responsive and flexible to the needs of our program over the years, which has helped us to achieve our goals. At last year's oversight hearing, we suggested that OVS-JG invest in a more effective data collection system to replace Survey Monkey, which OVS-JG previously used to gather reporting data from its grantees. We are happy to report that OVS-JG has moved to a web-based Excel spreadsheet system that makes our reporting easier and also allows us to compare our data from quarter to quarter, which will help us to improve our programs.

We ask that the DC Council and the Administration continue to support the critical role that OVS-JG plays in funding for services of domestic violence survivors. Even with the large number of clients we serve, we still have a significant waiting list for our services, particularly in the area of divorce and custody. We look forward to working with Chairman Allen and his staff to support survivors of domestic violence. I am available any time to answer any questions that this committee might have. Thank you.