

**Committee on Judiciary & Public Safety
Budget Hearing
April 14, 2023
Testimony of Sara B. Tennen
Executive Director, DC Volunteer Lawyers Project**

Good morning Council Member Pinto.

My name is Sara Tennen, and I am the Executive Director of DC Volunteer Lawyers Project.

DCVLP plays an important role here in the District where we provide free legal and support services to low income domestic violence victims, vulnerable children, and immigrant victims of gender based violence.

At DCVLP we empower victims to ensure that their voices are heard, and guide them through the often challenging legal process with a focus on achieving client defined safety and success.

Under the best of circumstances, it is really hard for a victim to leave her abuser.

But when you don't know where you're going to live or what will happen to your children, or if you will be deported, then the process is incredibly complicated and it takes a continuum of providers.

Over the past three years, the District has invested additional funding in the access to justice initiative and in victim services funding. DCVLP has been fortunate to benefit from both. Compared to our staffing into 2020, because of increased awards, we have almost 9 more full-time attorneys on staff than we did prior to the pandemic. This is over a third of our entire legal team.

There are a few key points I want to highlight for you as Council considers the proposed cuts in the Mayor's Budget

1. Domestic Violence filings are up in DC Superior Court. In the first quarter of 2023, 1,911 intrafamily offenses cases were filed. This does not include Anti Stalking cases. If this rate continues, we can expect 7,644 domestic violence cases being filed in the 2023 calendar year. Compared to 4,632 filed in 2022, this would be an astronomical increase of 65%. The number in 2022 was 13% higher than the number filed in 2021. This trend is going in the wrong direction. If funding stays level, there will be significant unmet need. If you cut funding, the ramifications will be nothing short of catastrophic.
2. 9 More attorneys means we can operate 8 weekly clinics- 4 in person and 4 remote. These clinics support our domestic violence clients and our immigration clients. These clinics operate in spaces where our clients are already receiving services- like AIDS Healthcare foundation and Children's National- Columbia Heights location, and at the Mount Pleasant public library and Stanton Commons in Anacostia. These 8 weekly clinics are all busy. It means that more people in our community have access to information and understand their legal rights and options.
3. Prepandemic, we had only in person clinics. During the height of the pandemic we had only virtual. Now we have both. The same is true for court hearings. Before it was all in person, for a while it was all online. Now we are practicing law both in virtual courtrooms and in person

courtrooms. There are no two ways about this. It takes virtually double the resources to do that, and operating this way is not optional. It is simply a reality.

4. Nine more attorneys means that we can represent many more vulnerable children who fall between the cracks of a child welfare system that does not remove them and home situations that are simply not safe. Our child clients include children who have a deceased sibling believed to be murdered by a parent. Our child clients include children who have witnessed one parent murder another parent. Our child clients include countless children growing up in homes with domestic violence, parents with untreated mental health issues and significant substance abuse issues. When you think about prevention and breaking the cycle of violence, our child advocacy practice should be at the front of your mind. This work is critical and changes the trajectory of our child clients' lives.
5. Nine more attorneys means we can offer immigration services at our weekly clinics and provide more individuals with representation. The immigration system is impossible to navigate without a lawyer. After my testimony, you will hear from 2 DCVLP clients who were directly represented as a result of Access to Justice Funding we received through the DC Bar Foundation to support our immigration program. But for that funding, these individuals would have been unrepresented.
6. We make every single dollar invested in DCVLP count. We utilize an innovative, volunteer lawyer model, where we recruit, train, and supervise hundreds of lawyers each year who contribute pro bono hours to supporting our clients. This model allows us to leverage our resources so that every one dollar invested in DCVLP turns into over \$6 in free legal services. In 2022, 450 volunteer lawyers provided 48,000 pro bono hours valued at \$18Million in free legal services. In just one year.
7. We are not relying on the District to fully foot the bill for our work. Our 2023 annual budget is just over \$3.3 million. One third of our revenue comes from contributions from individuals, corporations, and law firms. Another third comes from private foundations. The last third is government funding through OVSJG and the Mayor's Office. We are not asking for the District to cover the entire cost of our work. We are simply asking that the District do its part. This proposed budget does not have the District doing its part.

The proposed cuts will be nothing short of catastrophic for our community. These cuts will have impacts for generations to come. Children will grow up seeing the systems are not made for them, not made to protect them, and not made to ensure that they have a fair shot.

As a member of the Victim Assistance Network, we urge the D.C. Council to provide \$15.268 million in recurring local funding to OVSJG's budget to meet the required \$47.6 million baseline dedicated funding level for Victim Services in FY24.

Thank you for your work, Council Member Pinto. Thank you for ensuring that OVS-JG and the Access to Justice Initiative are appropriately funded so that each District resident truly has a fair shot. I'm happy to answer any questions.