

# **DC VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT**

**A voice for victims and children in the DC metro area since 2008**

**5335 WISCONSIN AVENUE NW, STE. 440 | WASHINGTON, DC 20015**  
**Tel. (202) 885-5542 | Fax (202) 885-5529 | [www.dcvlp.org](http://www.dcvlp.org)**

## **Testimony of Tara Branine, Equal Justice Works Fellow Sponsored by Crowell & Moring Foundation**

### **DC Volunteer Lawyers Project Before the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety Council of the District of Columbia Public Oversight Hearing – Office of the Attorney General**

Good morning. Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Tara Branine, and I am an attorney at the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project.

DCVLP is a non-profit organization that was established in 2008. We provide comprehensive, pro bono legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence, including survivors of dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and gender-based violence. We also represent at-risk children living with abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and other dangerous circumstances. Additionally, we represent vulnerable immigrant populations seeking humanitarian forms of immigration relief. We provide legal representation to our clients in civil protection order, family law, and immigration cases. We also provide free legal advice and brief services to survivors through our various legal clinics throughout the District of Columbia. In 2023, DCVLP provided legal representation to 537 survivors of domestic violence in protection order cases, and helped 342 survivors and their children in family law cases, including divorce and custody.

For the past year and half, as an Equal Justice Works Fellow sponsored by Crowell Moring Foundation, my practice at DCVLP has focused on helping survivors impacted by gun violence. Among other things, I represent clients in D.C. Superior Court in Extreme Risk Protection Order, or ERPO, cases, as well as in Civil Protection Order cases that have a gun violence component.

Since September 2022 I have had many occasions to work with and learn from the dedicated attorneys in the Domestic Violence Section at the DC Office of the Attorney General. I have worked with OAG in connection with my ERPO cases, as well as on Criminal Contempt cases, where OAG prosecutes contempt of a CPO involving a DCVLP client. I'd like to highlight a few examples, starting with our ERPO cases.

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ERPOs are civil orders used to prohibit the purchase or possession of firearms or ammunition by those who pose a significant risk of causing bodily injury to self or others. Several categories of people can petition for an ERPO, including MPD officers, mental healthcare professionals, and people related to the Respondent. Survivors of domestic violence can also file for an ERPO if they have a qualifying relationship with the Respondent, like being married or having a child in common. When a survivor files for an ERPO, OAG can intervene in the case on behalf of the government.

OAG attorneys have been invaluable partners in our ERPO cases in several ways. First, OAG has been instrumental in helping DCVLP attorneys to timely secure crucial evidence in our ERPO cases, including police records and body worn camera footage. Normally, to obtain body worn camera footage, nonprofit attorneys are required to jump through a series of time-consuming hoops that include petitioning for a court-issued protective order, issuing a subpoena to MPD for the footage, and then awaiting a response, often requiring multiple follow up inquiries. This process can take weeks, with potentially deadly consequences for clients who are in need of immediate protection. OAG is able to timely access this evidence, intervene in our case, and upload the evidence as a trial exhibit, allowing our case to resolve more quickly.

Second, OAG has time and again shown a willingness to step in to support individual DCVLP clients when the tools available to our attorneys fall short. In one of our cases, our client, who had recently broken up with the Respondent and as a result did not have the requisite qualifying relationship under the ERPO statute, was unable to file for an ERPO herself. OAG staff worked to find a law enforcement officer to file on our client's behalf. Without OAG's efforts, that vulnerable client would not have been able to obtain an ERPO against her abuser.

Third, OAG attorneys have also generously shared their technical guidance and advice to assist us in working through complex legal issues. For example, OAG helped us think through when and how an ERPO warrant can be issued, and when the issuance of a warrant meets the probable cause standard.

Turning to CPO contempt cases, our clients have had uniformly positive experiences working with OAG attorneys. OAG attorneys proactively communicate with our clients in a trauma-informed manner to explain the contempt process and their decision whether to seek charges. Where charges are sought, OAG provides clients with regular updates as the case

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progresses.

OAG also refers clients who may need additional legal services to DCVLP. In one instance, OAG referred a case to our office so that we could assist the client in filing a motion to extend where they were working with the client on a criminal contempt case. We eventually agreed to fully represent that client in a custody case.

Which brings me to my final point. I want to use this opportunity to thank the dedicated OAG attorneys who have gone above and beyond in helping us to secure justice on behalf of our survivor clients. I have had wonderful experiences working with every attorney at OAG. Assistant Attorney General Sarah Connell and I most frequently work together, and I am consistently amazed at her breadth of knowledge and expertise, her willingness to find creative solutions for cases, and her dedication to her work. There is no question that many of our clients and their families are safer today in part due to OAG's ongoing commitment to serving some of the most vulnerable people in our city, and to partnering with organizations like DCVLP who share this mission.

Thank you for your time.

/s/ Tara Branine

Tara Branine

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