



Ending the cycle of violence for survivors and children through pro bono legal aid

**Testimony of Robyn Swanson, Volunteer Legal Advocates on
B26-0572, the Child Support Amendment Act of 2026
Public Hearing Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
March 18, 2026 at 10:30 AM**

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and Members of the Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of B26-0572, the Child Support Amendment Act of 2026. My name is Robyn Swanson, and I am the Managing Attorney for Impact Litigation and Advocacy at Volunteer Legal Advocates, formerly the D.C. Volunteer Lawyers Project.

Volunteer Legal Advocates was founded in 2008 to provide high quality, pro bono legal services to survivors of domestic violence, immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, and vulnerable children. We use an innovative volunteer lawyer model where we train and supervise pro bono lawyers to broaden our impact. In 2025, over 600 lawyers volunteered with us, contributing \$23M in free legal services. Together we provided legal assistance and support to over 3,000 adults and children.

I am here today to testify in support of B26-0572, the Child Support Amendment Act of 2026.

Regular child support payments can significantly improve family financial stability and help ensure that children have access to basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare. However, current child support policies often place disproportionate financial obligations on noncustodial parents with the lowest incomes and the greatest barriers to employment. According to the Aspen Institute, unpaid child support arrears have grown to approximately \$116 billion over the past four decades, with roughly 70 percent owed by noncustodial parents earning under \$10,000 annually. Much of this debt is unlikely to ever be collected.

We know that child support systems can be structured in ways that better support children and families and that improve parental engagement. Across the country, lawmakers are increasingly adopting more holistic, family-centered approaches to child support policy. These approaches focus on addressing the underlying causes of nonpayment, ensuring

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that children directly benefit from support payments, and supporting healthy co-parenting relationships.

B26-0572 would move the District in that direction by reforming how child support payments are distributed to families who currently receive, or previously received, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Under current law, the interaction between TANF and child support often prevents low-income families from receiving the full amount of support paid on their behalf. Families receiving TANF, who by definition have incomes at or below 60 percent of the federal poverty level, must assign their right to child support payments to the District as a condition of receiving benefits. The District operates under a cost-recovery model in which collected child support is shared with the federal government. A portion supports the District's child support enforcement operations, while the remainder is retained by the Federal Treasury.

Federal law permits states and the District to "pass through" some or all collected child support payments to families receiving TANF. For many years, the District capped the pass-through amount at \$150 per month. In 2023, following action by the Council and the Office of the Attorney General, the District increased the pass-through amount to \$200. Under current practice, if a noncustodial parent makes a \$300 child support payment, the family receives \$150 while the remaining \$150 is retained and shared with the federal government.

Passing additional child support funds directly to custodial parents makes a meaningful difference for families living in poverty. For many of our clients, using the example I just mentioned, an additional \$150 per month can cover critical basic needs that they otherwise struggle to afford. That amount can pay for a week's worth of groceries for children, cover essential medication, keep utility bills current to prevent service shutoffs, or contribute toward safe and stable housing. For our many clients who are balancing rent, transportation, childcare, and medical expenses on a limited income, this additional support can be the difference between meeting children's basic needs or going without. Ensuring that these funds reach families directly strengthens both immediate family stability and long-term child well-being.

The current system also leads to a dynamic where custodial parents do not see the value in pursuing child support. Many of our clients who receive TANF use child support as a negotiation tool in civil protection order and custody matters—agreeing to accept a lower payment in exchange for other concessions—because they know they will only receive a fraction of any funds that are eventually collected. This not only reduces the financial resources available to children but also undermines the fundamental goal of the child support system: ensuring that children receive consistent support from both parents.

Research shows that parents are more willing and able to pay child support when payments go directly to their children, rather than being retained by the government. According to a 2023 study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, pass-through policies increase both the likelihood and amount of child support paid while also improving parental engagement with the support system. For example, in its first year after implementing a policy to pass through all current monthly support and excluding those payments when determining families' TANF eligibility and benefits (also known as providing a "disregard"), Colorado found that total current collections for TANF families rose 76 percent based on an analysis of its administrative data.¹

The Child Support Improvement Amendment Act would move the District away from the cost-recovery model and toward a more family-centered approach. The legislation would require the District to pass through state-assigned child support arrears to families who currently receive or previously received TANF, ensuring that children benefit from the full amount of support collected on their behalf. It would also update the period of enforceability for child support orders by allowing enforcement until the youngest child covered by the order turns 26, providing custodial parents additional time to collect unpaid support while establishing a clear end point for noncustodial parents. By reforming pass-through policies and implementing family-centered approaches, B26-0572 ensures that child support serves children first, rather than creating incentives that disadvantage them.

Volunteer Legal Advocates also supports several additional reforms proposed by Legal Aid that would further strengthen the District's child support system:

- **Prioritize families in federal tax refund intercepts:** Intercepted funds should first be applied to current support or the pass-through before government-owed debt.
- **Automatically suspend child support during incarceration:** Prevents unmanageable debt and supports successful reentry for parents unable to pay while incarcerated.
- **Expand "good cause" exemptions for TANF recipients:** Allows families flexibility in cooperation requirements, protecting co-parenting relationships, children's relationships with parents, immigration status, and survivor safety.
- **Limit driver's license suspensions for low-income parents:** Prevents unintended economic harm while supporting compliance.

Expanding the "good cause" exemption for TANF recipients is particularly important for domestic violence survivors. TANF cash assistance can be a critical lifeline for survivors, providing the financial stability needed to leave abusive situations and rebuild their lives. The child support cooperation requirement can create barriers for survivors seeking these benefits. Survivors may choose not to apply for TANF out of concern that participation

¹ Michael Martinez-Schiferi, Tom Zolot, and Larry Desbien, "Poster Paper: Effects of Child Support Pass through on Colorado Families in Need," Colorado Department of Human Services, November 7, 2019, <https://appam.confex.com/appam/2019/webprogram/Paper30963.html>.

could trigger new abuse or reveal their location to an abusive partner. Pursuing a child support case can inadvertently expose survivors to ongoing harassment, disrupt carefully negotiated co-parenting arrangements, or create risks related to immigration status.

By broadening the scope of “good cause” and simplifying the exemption process, this legislation ensures that survivors can prioritize their safety and well-being without losing essential benefits for their children. Expanding this exemption is a concrete step toward aligning child support policy with family-centered, trauma-informed practices that protect both parents and children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.