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**Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety**

**Public Hearing:
Budget Oversight Hearing
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants
April 25, 2024**

**Marla Spindel
Executive Director, DC KinCare Alliance**

Good Morning Chairperson Pinto and Members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. As the Executive Director of DC KinCare Alliance, I want to express my sincere appreciation for your support of DC legal services through funding the Access to Justice Initiative and to ask that you continue to do so this year. Funding the Initiative provides critical legal help to DC's low-income residents, ensuring they receive the legal rights and financial assistance to which they are entitled. This in turn results in a brighter future for our children and families so they do not just survive but thrive and fully participate in the DC community and economy. Moreover, you are saving the government money because legal services organizations help ensure benefits applications and court pleadings are completed correctly, thereby conserving agency staff time and effort. They also help these children and families receive benefits, thereby providing financial supports to our city's most under-resourced communities.

DC KinCare Alliance was founded in 2017 to support the legal, financial, and related service needs of relative caregivers (predominantly grandmothers living in Wards 5, 7 and 8) who step up to raise DC children in their extended families in times of crisis when the children's parents are not able to care for them due to mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration, death, abuse and neglect, and deportation. Approximately 22,000 Black and brown DC children are living in kinship care arrangements, representing about 20% of all DC children of color. The majority of these children live at or near the poverty level, have experienced trauma, and are at grave risk for poor physical, emotional, and educational outcomes. Research shows that kinship care is a powerful stabilizing force for these children, changing the trajectory of their lives for the better.

The specific needs we address —the inability to access legal rights, economic security, housing, food, financial opportunities, health care, and other supports and services—are those

faced by all low-income, under-resourced communities of color, but are exacerbated for kinship families because they are not recognized by the systems that are supposed to help and support them. Our goal is to eliminate this unequal treatment using a threefold approach: (1) providing direct legal representation; (2) furnishing information and education about legal rights and benefits; and (3) using advocacy and impact litigation to break down systemic barriers.

DC KinCare Alliance is the only organization in DC focused solely on serving relative caregivers raising DC's at-risk children. Our accomplishments over the 6 years since our founding include: providing legal services to more than 850 relative caregivers raising more than 1,000 at-risk DC children in over 1,000 legal matters; establishing a free legal helpline and court walk-in clinic; and distributing more than 2,500 copies of our DC Relative Caregiver Legal Resource Guide.

Funding from the Access to Justice Initiative, which accounts for about half of our operating budget, has made these accomplishments possible. Without this funding, we would be forced to drastically reduce the number of relative caregivers we serve, resulting in many of them not being able to get custody of the children in their care or financial benefits to help raise them. Kinship care provides safety and security for vulnerable children who have nowhere else to go when their parents are not able to care for them. Failing to support these caregivers with legal help will have a watershed effect on DC's kinship families, resulting in many more children becoming homeless, dropping out of school, not having enough food to eat, or entering the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

I have attached a Position Statement from our Relative Caregiver Community Board advocating for the DC Council to fully fund the DC Access to Justice Initiative.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

DC KINCARE ALLIANCE RELATIVE CAREGIVER COMMUNITY BOARD
Position Statement In Support of Fully Funding the DC Access to Justice Initiative

April 17, 2024

Why We Care

The DC KinCare Alliance Relative Caregiver Community Board is a constituent board made up of grandparents, aunts, cousins, siblings, and godparents raising at-risk DC children whose parents cannot care for them because of domestic violence, death, incarceration, substance use, and mental health disorders. The children we are raising are great kids but they need extra help because of the abuse and neglect they suffered before they came to live with us. We also need help because we do not have much money, we were not expecting to raise these children, and there is a lot to figure out to make sure they have everything they need.

What Kind of Help We Need

We face an uphill battle every time we try to get help for our children because government benefits and the legal, healthcare, and educational systems are all designed for traditional families, not families that look like ours. It is really hard to figure out what we are supposed to do when we are trying to get the children what they need. We need help to get legal custody to keep the children safe, take them to the doctor and register them for school; apply for financial benefits to feed and clothe the children; and add them to our housing vouchers. A lot of times, we do not even have basic documents for the children, like Medicaid cards, birth certificates or Social Security cards, which we need to get almost any kind of benefit or service for them.

How the DC Access to Justice Initiative Helps Kinship Families Like Ours

Legal services programs help us get what we need in a timely and effective way. They help us to get custody of the children in court, which is often very hard for us because we need to serve the parents and they are difficult to locate. They also help us apply for benefits like TANF, SNAP and the caregiver subsidies by completing applications on the government application portals and uploading documents. These portals are not easy to understand, especially for people like us who only have cell phones and not computers or, even if we do have computers, our internet is slow or unreliable. Legal services organizations also help us with applying for other programs like ERAP, utility assistance, rental assistance, unemployment benefits, or getting children evaluated for an IEP. Like many low-income DC families, we also need help from legal services programs when there are housing condition issues, like mold or vermin in our homes, that our landlords ignore.

What We Are Requesting

We are requesting that the DC Council fully fund the DC Access to Justice Initiative so families like ours can get help from advocates to obtain the services and supports we need to raise the children in our care and give them a brighter future.

Inquiries about this Position Statement may be directed to:

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