



1101 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 450
Washington, DC 20036
www.dckincare.org

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

**Public Hearing:
Performance Oversight Hearing
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants
January 29, 2025**

**Victoria Taplin
Managing Attorney, Policy & Advocacy
DC KinCare Alliance**

Good Afternoon Chairperson Pinto and Members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. As Managing Attorney for Advocacy & Policy with DC KinCare Alliance, I want to express our sincere appreciation for your support of D.C. legal services and especially for your leadership to ensure the Access to Justice Initiative is adequately funded.

DC KinCare Alliance is a member of the Fair Budget Coalition, and supports budget priorities and policies that alleviate poverty in the District of Columbia. Funding the Access to Justice Initiative provides critical legal help to D.C.'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 D.C. community and economy. The stability this provides to families and youth increases public safety around our schools and in our neighborhoods. 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.

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 D.C. 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 D.C. children are living in kinship care arrangements, representing about 20% of all D.C. 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 D.C.'s at-risk children. Our accomplishments over the 7 years since our founding include: providing legal services to more than 1,000 relative caregivers raising more than 1,000 at-risk D.C. children in over 1,000 legal matters; establishing a free legal helpline and court walk-in clinic; and distributing more than 3,000 copies of our D.C. Relative Caregiver Legal Resource Guide. We have also successfully advocated for changes to laws, regulations and policies that reduce barriers to access public benefits and services.

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 D.C.'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. Supporting these caregivers with legal help today

stabilizes kinship families, which in turn helps build safe and secure neighborhoods and schools, providing a firm foundation for our children to become the leaders of tomorrow.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.