Testimony before the
District of Columbia Council

Committee on Human Services

Budget Hearing

Department of Human Services

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Good afternoon, Chairman Wells and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Josh Gupta-Kagan, and I am a Policy Attorney at The Children’s Law Center in Washington, D.C. I join with other advocates in strongly encouraging the Council to increase TANF funding by $10 million over the FY’08 budget. Doing so will help repair the District’s safety net and prevent many District children from suffering from abuse and neglect – and prevent the District government from having to undertake the expensive and difficult interventions that follow from child abuse and neglect.

My colleagues at The Children’s Law Center and I have tremendous experience working with families who have experienced child abuse and neglect, and who are at risk of abuse and neglect. We represent almost 1,000 children and families each year, most of whom have some contact with the abuse and neglect system. Every day, we see children who have been abused and neglected, and parents and caregivers struggling to take care of their children. It is that experience that shows The Children’s Law Center the crucial importance of fighting poverty as a means of fighting abuse and neglect.

Research shows that poverty is a leading – perhaps the leading – cause of child abuse and neglect. One recent Harvard study described poverty as “the strongest factor known to be correlated with child abuse and neglect.” Various authorities, ranging from the American Humane Society, to the American Association of Family Physicians, to the Children’s Defense

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1 The Children’s Law Center helps children in the District of Columbia find safe, permanent homes by providing free, comprehensive legal services to children, their families and foster and kinship caregivers. The Children’s Law Center is the largest civil legal services organization in the District of Columbia and the only organization that provides comprehensive representation to children. We provide comprehensive representation to more than 1,000 children and families each year, working to keep children safe, to keep families together, and to empower caregivers to meet a child’s every need.


Fund, conclude that “poverty is the most frequently and persistently noted risk factor for child abuse.” Children in families earning less than $15,000 a year are 22 times more likely to have a substantiated case of child abuse and neglect than children in families earning more than $30,000 a year.

This national pattern holds true in the District of Columbia. The D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute evaluated substantiated reports of abuse and neglect and concluded that children living in the District’s poorest neighborhoods are seven times more likely to be abused or neglected than those living in the District’s richest neighborhoods, and twice as likely to be abused or neglected as those living in moderate-income neighborhoods.

Poverty causes child abuse and neglect because it imposes multiple stressors on families. Living in poverty, especially the deep and chronic poverty in which too many District children live, means not knowing whether you’re going to be able to afford tomorrow’s meal for your child, next week’s utility bill, or next month’s metro fare for your child to go to school or for you to go to your job training program. It means fighting with the landlord to fix your kitchen appliances, searching high and low for quality affordable services for your child, and worrying about whether your children are safe in your neighborhood.

Of course, the vast majority of poor parents do not abuse or neglect their children. But sometimes those stressors build up and push parents over the edge. When crises happen, or when parents or caregivers need to address their own needs, the stressors of poverty combine and lead to abuse or neglect. The vast majority of abuse and neglect cases do not involve bad parents

6 Bethea, supra.
7 Children’s Defense Fund, supra.
doing bad things. They involve poor parents struggling to handle the many stressors of their lives – most of which are linked to poverty.

Research demonstrates that when states provide better financial supports to parents, they prevent many of those parents from letting the stress of poverty lead them to mistreat their children. As one study put it, “basic supports that help families cope with the stresses associated with poverty – especially in times of crisis or intensified need – play an important role in preventing maltreatment.”

National and local evidence powerfully demonstrates that increasing financial support to impoverished parents and caregivers reduces the incidence of child abuse and neglect and reduces the need to bring children into foster care. Two studies, by Columbia and Princeton University professors, predict that a ten percent increase in TANF rates will decrease the frequency of child neglect by more than thirty percent and decrease new foster care placements by about 8 percent. The leading study reviews a decade’s worth of child abuse and neglect rates from across the nation, including the District of Columbia, and performs statistical regressions to account for the effects of various welfare reforms. The results of these studies are clear: “more generous welfare benefits are associated with significantly lower levels of neglect and smaller numbers of children in out-of-home care.” This conclusion holds true no matter how flexibly or how strictly states set other welfare policies, and the professors described it as

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9 Schorr and Marchand at 2-8.
11 The study’s authors included in their statistical analysis “state fixed effect,” a “logarithm of the state’s population, the logarithm of the number of children in the state, the fraction of children in different age categories, the fraction of children who live in urban areas, the fraction of children in different ethnic groups, and the fraction of children whose mothers do not have a high-school degree.” Paxson and Waldfogel at 9. That is, the study accounts for basic demographic differences from one state to another.
12 Paxson and Waldfogel (2001) at 16.
13 Id. at 16-17. Other welfare policies include work requirements, time limits for benefits, and family caps.
“one of our most robust results.” Other studies reach similar conclusions – increased TANF benefits are significantly related to lower numbers of children living away from their families through foster care or the delinquency system.

Recent local evidence confirms that providing financial support to caregivers protects children from abuse and neglect. The Grandparent Caregivers Pilot Program – which this Committee heard about at the CFSA budget hearing – provides financial support to grandparents and other relatives raising children living under 200 percent of the poverty line. The program served 564 children in 2007, its first full year of operation. That year, child protective authorities removed only one child who participated in the pilot program – an annual removal rate of 0.18 percent. In contrast, a review of new neglect cases filed in 2007 reveals that among similarly impoverished children whose parents or caregivers did not benefit from the Pilot Program, the annual removal rate was 0.67 percent, almost four times higher. In other words, providing direct financial assistance to low-income families dramatically reduces the need for child protective authorities to remove children, perhaps by as much as a multiple of four. (For

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14 Paxson and Waldfogel (2001) at 22.
15 Lawrence M. Berger, Children living out-of-home: Effects of family and environmental characteristics, 28 Children & Youth Servs. Rev. 158, 170 & 175 (2006). Professor Berger predicts that a significant increase in the total benefit provided by TANF and food stamps – from $500 to $800 a month – will lead to a 79 percent decrease in the rate of children placed away from home in a “service setting” – a foster care, delinquency, or mental health placement.
17 The District government filed 532 new neglect cases in 2007. Superior Court of the District of Columbia, Family Court 2007 Annual Report at 33 (2008), http://www.dccourts.gov/dccourts/docs/family/family_annualreport2008.pdf. The District removed children in 457 of those cases. Id. at 40 (noting that the District removed children in 86 percent of newly filed cases in 2007). CLC has conservatively assumed that 400 of those cases involved removals to foster care of children living below 200 percent of the poverty line. (CLC experience shows that the vast majority of removals involves a family under 200 percent of the poverty line.) Census data shows that there are 59,000 children living below 200 percent of the poverty line. Kids Count Data Center, http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/profile_results.jsp?r=10&d=1&c=1&p=1&x=124&y=9. Thus we estimate the annual removal rate for children living at or below 200 percent of the poverty line to be 0.67 percent.
18 Further research into the precise extent of the GCPP’s prevention effect is necessary before we can draw conclusions with certainty. Nonetheless, the data strongly suggests that aggressive anti-poverty measures can reduce child removals and protect children from abuse and neglect.
this reason, I also reiterate The Children’s Law Center’s request that the Council expand the Grandparent Caregivers Pilot Program by $1 million so it can serve the more than 100 children currently on its waiting list.)

The leading research and the District’s experience therefore show that increasing TANF rates will likely prevent abuse and neglect, protect children, and avoid the need for intrusive and expensive intervention in families by child protective authorities. However, rather than increasing TANF rates, the District government has allowed inflation to dramatically erode the real value of welfare benefits over the last two decades, and while the Mayor has proposed a small increase in TANF funding, that proposal barely, if at all, keeps pace with the past year’s inflation, let alone address the longer term decline in benefits’ real value. Without more substantial increases, the District government will perpetuate the status quo in which families receive significantly reduced TANF benefits. Reducing benefits has been shown to increase the likelihood of involvement with the child protective system. Various studies have shown, for instance, that families whose welfare benefits had been reduced were more likely than other families to enter the child welfare system, as were families whose benefits were interrupted. Families with reduced benefits also achieved reunification more slowly than other families.

Preventing children from entering the foster care system will save the District substantial funds – each year in foster care costs, on average, more than $45,000 in local funds. Much

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19 The D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute has documented how, adjusted for inflation, the District’s TANF benefits have fallen from 47 percent of the federal poverty line to 29 percent from 1990 until the present. DC Fiscal Policy Institute, What’s In the FY 2009 Budget for TANF?, www.dcfpi.org/2009tanf.pdf.
20 Paxson and Waldfogel (2001), at 7. One leading study concluded that “the reduction of a family’s welfare grant . . . does, in fact heighten the risk of involvement” when a child’s caretaker cannot obtain employment. Kristen Shook, Does the Loss of Welfare Income Increase the Risk of Involvement with the child Welfare System, 21 Children & Youth Servs. Rev. 781, 809 (1999).
21 Id.
22 The Mayor’s proposed FY ’09 budget for the Child and Family Services Agency includes $92,629,000 in local funds for “out of home care and support,” $3,270,000 in local funds for “teen services” (services provided to teens who were in foster care at age 15), and $8,156,000 in local funds for “foster care services.” Mayor’s Proposed FY
more significantly, preventing the need for foster care will save the human costs that flow from child abuse and neglect and the forced removal of children from their families.

To do right by our children, the District should provide families with the financial support necessary to meet children’s basic needs and remove enough of the stressors of poverty to prevent families from slipping over the edge into abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, the District has not provided enough basic financial supports to families, and the Mayor’s budget does not do nearly enough to rectify that situation. The Children’s Law Center joins with other advocates in seeking a $10 million increase to the District’s TANF budget. Especially now – when the District’s attention is focused on child abuse and neglect and when the Child and Family Services Agency is struggling to handle a dramatically increased caseload – the Council should do everything in its power to prevent abuse and neglect. Doing so will relieve the burden at CFSA, prevent the need for expensive government intrusion into families, and, most importantly, improve the safety and well being of the District’s children. I ask this Committee to take a leading role to protect children by increasing the TANF budget by $10 million.

Thank you.

‘09 Budget at E-17 – E-18. The sum of those costs ($104,055,000) divided by the number of children in out of home care (about 2300 children) equals $45,241 per child. That figure understates the full cost of foster care because it excludes funds for adoption activity and permanency subsidies, court costs, and CFSA management, policy, planning, data analysis, and quality improvement activities.