



501 3rd Street, NW · 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
May 12, 2017

Public Hearing:
"Fiscal Year 2018 Local Budget Act of 2017," "Fiscal Year 2018 Federal Budget Act of
2017" and "Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Support Act of 2017"

Judith Sandalow
Executive Director
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director at Children's Law Center¹ and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

Children's Law Center has testified before several Council Committees regarding the budgets of specific agencies.² Rather than reiterate that testimony, I will simply incorporate it as part of my written testimony and focus today on the budget more broadly. Just like a family budget, the District's budget isn't only a laundry list of income and expenses. It is a series of interlocking investments. Whether it is an effective budget doesn't depend on a few exciting initiatives being funded, but instead on whether the expenditures work together.

When it comes to low-income children, the need to consider the entire budget is even more critical. Children are dependent on their families – and as DC has become more and more expensive, low-income children's families do not have the financial resources to buy the basics: safe housing, bus fare, nutritious food and medical care.

With nearly one in five DC residents living in poverty³, the city's financial health and its future successes rise and fall on whether the budget includes the programs and plans needed to help lift these families out of poverty. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute reported last year that DC's persistent income inequality is wider than that of most U.S. cities – a sign that “DC's economy is not working for many and that development, which is pushing up housing costs, is leaving collateral damage in its wake.”⁴

“Safety net” is an apt metaphor for a reason: The supportive fibers are woven together to keep a child from falling through. But a safety net won't be enough to help children partake in the city's prosperity. To include low-income children, we need more than a loosely woven safety net. We need the strands woven tightly together with the strength of a trampoline so that children can bounce high over the many barriers that keep low-income children from succeeding.

There are some essential “fibers” in this budget. The Mayor included an end to the too rigid 60-month time limit on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Councilmember Nadeau, a leader in the TANF reform effort, has introduced a necessary modification that we believe more fully captures the intent of the 2016 TANF Extension Working Group convened by the Mayor and DHS Director Laura Zeilinger. This change will prevent some 10,000 DC children from losing their TANF payments this fall and, since most families receiving TANF get no housing assistance, will reduce the likelihood of homelessness, hardship and destabilized lives.⁵

The proposed budget also includes the funding necessary to give infants and toddlers with mild developmental delays the early intervention services they need to catch up to their typically developing peers and start kindergarten ready to learn. More than 1,000 infants and toddlers a year will benefit from this program. The proposed budget also moves forward two key special education reforms - the extension of transition planning to middle school students (age 14) and the acceleration of evaluation timelines for students with suspected disabilities from 120 days to 60 days. While we still urge that the funding for these reforms be certified, leaders within the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) have stated repeatedly that these reforms are funded and will take effect by July 1, 2018.⁶

These, however, are just a few strands in the safety net. Without safe, stable housing, an infant whose developmental delays are addressed by the early intervention program is still at risk of impaired brain development caused by the chaos and toxic stress of homelessness. The proposed budget provides no new rental assistance to move families off housing wait lists or make newly built affordable housing projects accessible to the poorest families. It provides less than half of the first-year cost of a five-year plan to address youth homelessness.

Similarly, a young adult who has aged out of foster care can enroll in a well-funded GED or job training program to set her on the path to employment, but recent surveys show that the inability to pay for bus fare is preventing many adult learners

from accessing this critical step toward independence. \$2 million to extend the free transportation benefit that schoolchildren enjoy to adult learners ages 18 – 24 is the fix suggested by the Deputy Mayor for Education. Yet it is not in the budget as proposed. With Metro anticipating steep fare hikes, even more adult learners are sure to be left behind.

The District's economy is thriving. We have increased revenues that could tighten the strands of our safety net. Unfortunately, the Mayor chose to forfeit \$100 million to tax cuts, including some that would benefit wealthy individuals and reduce our business tax below that of Virginia and Maryland. I urge the council to stop or delay these cuts.

Budgets reflect priorities. This budget as proposed fails to maintain the safety net that should protect our most vulnerable children. Our most vulnerable children need the bounce created by a trampoline woven from strong, interlocking programs, plans and supports.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions.

¹ Children's Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren't learning in school, or who have health problems that can't be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

² <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/testimony-department-human-services-fy2018-budget>

<http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/testimony-child-and-family-services-agency-fy2018-budget>

<http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/testimony-district-columbia-public-schools-fy2018-budget>

<http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/testimony-office-state-superintendent-education-fy2018-budget>

³ https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml.

⁴ <http://www.dcfpi.org/a-city-breaking-apart-the-incomes-of-dcs-poorest-residents-are-falling-while-economic-growth-is-benefiting-better-off-residents>.

⁵ https://media.wix.com/ugd/669d02_bbc269f3474f4cd98e283203a9987b7a.pdf.

⁶ OSSE Responses to Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Oversight Questions, April 18, 2017, Q. 11.