Good morning, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. My name is Sandy Bernstein and I am the Legal Director at Disability Rights DC (DRDC) at University Legal Services, the federally-designated Protection and Advocacy Program for people with disabilities in the District of Columbia. I am testifying today to urge the DC City Council to restore funding for the Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ) in the District of Columbia’s Fiscal Year 2025 budget. DRDC receives this critical funding, which has allowed us to provide legal representation and advocacy to low-income District residents with psychiatric and developmental disabilities who have housing-related legal needs. The clients we assist with this funding are especially vulnerable to rights’ violations and harm and could be left without legal representation if the Mayor’s proposed 67% cut remains in place.

With the funding DRDC receives from the ATJ Initiative for our Housing Advocacy for People with Psychiatric and Developmental Disabilities Project, DRDC has been able to advocate for people with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness, living in unsafe or substandard housing placements, in need of supports and services to remain living in the community or are stuck in institutional placements because they lack the housing and supports they need to live safely in the community. DRDC has represented individuals facing rights violations and/or abuse and neglect in their Department of Behavioral Health’s or Department on Disability Services’ housing placements and represented individuals facing reduction or
termination of their critical Medicaid home health aide services. DRDC has assisted people who live in inaccessible housing or require emotional support or service animals and need representation to seek reasonable accommodations so they can live safely in the community.

This funding has allowed DRDC to increase our representation to people with disabilities with the rights’ violations described above. For example, DRDC represented a woman, under the age of 40, with a physical disability and a psychiatric disability who was stuck in a nursing facility. The client was desperate to leave the nursing facility and move back to the community but neither the nursing facility nor DC government agencies were assisting her with this goal. DRDC ensured that she was reconnected with a Department of Behavioral Health core service agency, yet they failed to secure community housing for her. As her core service agency was failing to meet her needs, DRDC urged the Department of Behavioral Health to address her wheelchair accessible housing needs and she was provided with a housing voucher. DRDC also represented the client in seeking Medicaid home health aide services so she had the assistance she needed in the community for her activities of daily living. The client is now living in an apartment in DC and is provided with the Medicaid services she needs to be safe and to live a meaningful and productive life. Without DRDC’s legal advocacy and the funding we receive from the ATJ Initiative, this DC resident would still be languishing and segregated in an institution.

DRDC appreciates the City Council’s leadership and support for legal services to the District’s low income residents. The Mayor’s significant cut to the ATJ Initiative will be devastating to the District of Columbia residents who depend on legal service providers to protect their rights and services. Without funding from the ATJ Initiative, DRDC would not be able to provide the level of advocacy and representation needed to District residents with disabilities with housing-related legal needs. Many low income and vulnerable District residents
will have no other option for representation without this funding and will lose an essential safeguard to protect their rights.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide this testimony.