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

**Budget Oversight Hearing for
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants**

May 7, 2026

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto, for the opportunity to testify at today's Budget Oversight Hearing on the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG). My name is Misty Thomas Zaleski, and I am providing this testimony in my capacity as the Executive Director for the Council for Court Excellence (CCE) and as a former legal services lawyers here in D.C. CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with the mission of bringing people together to conduct research, educate, and advocate to make D.C.'s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community. For more than 40 years, CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis, convening diverse stakeholders, and creating educational resources for the public. Please note that in accordance with our policy, no judicial member of CCE participated in the formulation or approval of this testimony. This testimony does not reflect the specific views of, or endorsement by, any judicial member of CCE.

Thank you for this opportunity to present our organization's views on the Mayor's Proposed Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 Budget as it relates to the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants. I am here to express our strong support for restoring and protecting funding for the Access to Justice Initiative, a critical program that plays a vital role in ensuring that D.C. residents of limited financial means have access to civil legal services. The FY27 proposed budget would severely weaken the District's civil justice infrastructure, even as demand for assistance remains high. The FY27 proposed budget cuts OVSJG's Access to Justice Initiative from \$31,785,000 in FY26 to \$4,487,000 in FY27, a reduction of over \$27 million. (Table FO0-4). This is the largest program-level reduction in the entire agency (Table FO0-1).

It is shameful that this Administration has forced the legal community to do this dance of begging for baseline funding restoration year after year, knowing that the leaders in the D.C. Council will be the ones forced to cobble together the money to ensure that the legal needs of our community's most vulnerable and lower income residents get met. Most of the people here today have come each year asking the Council to restore funding that was cut in the Mayor's proposal, because they are deeply dedicated to providing high-quality legal aid for their clients and to a vision of justice for all. We should appreciate their dedication and commitment rather than

make them use their scarce resources coming here to defend a program that we all know is vital to community well-being.

These proposed cuts limit the District’s legal services infrastructure and undermine access to justice. The Access to Justice Initiative funds the organizations that provide legal representation and assistance to District residents facing eviction, domestic violence, public benefits issues, and other serious legal problems. These underlying need for these services in our community has not waned; in fact, given the cuts to social programs and the dramatic hits to the D.C. area employment landscape in the last year, they are likely to grow in the year ahead. A funding reduction of \$27.3 million would force legal service providers to reduce services, shutter programs, and turn away thousands of residents unable to pay for legal services. Ultimately, these changes would likely have a ripple effect on the health and well-being of the District, leading to increased evictions, reduced family stability, and additional strain on government systems.

The Access to Justice Initiative is not just a grant program, but a vital aspect of D.C.’s broader approach to promoting stability and equity so that all residents can navigate the legal system fairly. Restoring this funding is essential to ensuring that residents of limited means can access the legal protections they need to keep their housing, safety, and financial stability. Without these essential services, the District risks widening inequities and further harming marginalized communities.

Additionally, and as I frequently remind this Committee when we are here calling for this funding to be restored, just because someone does not have a lawyer in a civil matter, does not mean that their legal dispute or problem goes away. Defunding ATJ does not magically decrease the caseloads in our courts or the number of D.C. families experiencing crisis. Instead, it means that our judges must work more slowly and cautiously to support an unrepresented litigant who may be unfamiliar with the processes and legal standards for their case. With D.C.’s courts facing their own federal budget cuts, caseload backlogs, and ongoing judicial vacancies, the loss of legal services lawyers to help move cases more efficiently and to ensure that judges have the best information possible will further slow the wheels of justice. So, if the Council wants to help the D.C. Courts, our Office of Administrative Hearings, as well as the District’s low-income residents this year, fully funding Access to Justice is an important – if not the only locally-controlled – way to do so.

Ultimately, OVSJG has an outsized impact on the lives of D.C. residents. In addition to the Access to Justice grant administration, they are a critical source of resources for the victims’ and returning citizen services communities. All of these grant streams are vital to supporting a community-led ecosystem to serve our friends and neighbors who need support during some of the hardest moments in their lives. Stability in these funds is stability for our community. Unfortunately, the current FY27 proposed budget reduces OVSJG’s ability to provide access to civil justice and ensure that reentry and victims services programs remain viable. Therefore, CCE urges the Council to restore the proposed cuts and ensure that OVSJG has the resources necessary to meet its mission.

Thank you for your time.