**Testimony of Rema Sini King**

**District of Columbia Council**

**Committee on the Judiciary**

**Oversight Hearing**

**Monday, March 14, 2011**

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Rema Sini King and I live in southeast, DC, with my five children. I am here to testify about how a program funded by the Access to Justice Initiative has helped me and my family.

 Last year, I was homeless, until March, when I moved into an apartment through the Community Partnership’s shelter housing program. I was grateful for the apartment, and I didn’t expect it to cause health problems for me and my kids, but that’s exactly what happened. The apartment had bed bugs, and they bit up my son Derek and gave him a rash on his arms. I have a young daughter, too, Honesty, and one day she woke up crying in her crib; I saw two bedbugs crawling over her. We also had a mouse that tore up the rug. When I moved in, the landlord said an exterminator would come once a month, but I only saw an exterminator once. Then bedbugs came back and my landlord refused to call the exterminator again – he said Community Partnership was responsible.

There was a lot of mold in the apartment and all of my kids starting having upper respiratory concerns. My son Delon had to use his asthma machine consistently after we moved in. It was so bad that I had to take him to the doctor’s office every week or two. My son Donovan had to get on an inhaler and go to the doctor every month – and he hadn’t needed an inhaler since he was a baby. The baby would start wheezing and coughing whenever she was in the living room, near the mold. I tried to get the landlord to look at the mold but he refused. Once my case worker was over and asked the landlord to look at the mold but he refused her too. He sent some workers to paint over the mold. That seemed to be the only thing they did – paint over a problem. Of course the paint didn’t make the mold go away.

 I was fortunate a doctor at the Children’s Hospital clinic on Good Hope Road referred me to the Children’s Law Center. They use their Access to Justice funding to put a lawyer right out there in the community at the Good Hope Road clinic, so I could talk immediately with them, and they were able to help. My lawyer was able to get people to do things that they wouldn’t do when I called and that they wouldn’t do even when my caseworker called.

I had tried to get someone from DCRA to inspect my apartment, but they kept not showing up and rescheduling for some later date. They did that three times over two months. My lawyer finally did get someone from DCRA to inspect the apartment. With those inspection results, Community Partnership finally agreed to put me in a new, transitional apartment. And in the meantime, they would have some other contractors come out to deal with the apartment. That was in October 2010.

Still, they wouldn’t have let me and my family move to a new apartment without my lawyer. In December 2010, I was still in the same apartment, and my kids got sicker. A window in my apartment broke – in the middle of November – and even with winter coming, the landlord refused to repair it and tried to say I would have to pay for it out of pocket. It didn’t get repaired until December when I told my lawyer about it and she advocated with Community Partnership to make sure it got fixed. But the problems kept coming.

On December 20, something went wrong in the plumbing and sewage was backing up and overflowing into our shower. It was a completely unsanitary situation and I was worried about my children’s health if we had to stay. The landlord didn’t answer his phone and the maintenance man for the building said that other units had this problem but that he couldn’t fix it. My lawyer actually took care of the situation. She convinced Community Partnership that that apartment was not ok. Because of my lawyer’s advocacy, they put my family and me into a hotel that night and, by Christmas, we were in a new apartment.

Most importantly, my kids are healthier. Honesty is breathing well. Delon and Donovan are off their inhaler and don’t need to go to the doctor all the time. My apartment is safe of hazards to me and my children – a result that my lawyer and the Access to Justice program can both claim credit for.

 I know that times are tough and the government will have to make tough budget cuts. But if it wasn’t for the lawyer in my case, my kids would still be getting asthma attacks and rashes and going to the doctor all the time – and I know visiting the doctor costs a lot of money. So if you’re looking to save money, cutting the Access to Justice Initiative probably won’t help. You’ll just have a lot more sick kids.

 The Access to Justice program was there for me and my family when we needed it. I hope it will be there for other families who need it in the future. Thank you.