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Fiscal Year 2024 OVSJG Budget Hearing
Before the Council for the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Testimony of George A. Jones
Chief Executive Officer, Bread for the City

My name is George A. Jones, and I am the Chief Executive Officer at Bread for the City. Bread for the City is a private non-profit agency that works on behalf of and alongside D.C. residents living with low-income, predominantly people of color, as they fight for the opportunity to live and thrive in the nation's capital. Bread for the City provides food, clothing, social services, medical care, and civil legal services to reduce the burden of poverty. Bread for the City also supports District residents in developing an advocacy platform that elevates community member voices to demand a D.C. that eliminates disparities in housing, healthcare, justice, and a host of other socioeconomic disparities that people of color experience disproportionately in the District.

The Access to Justice Initiative grants have been an invaluable source of foundational support for Bread for the City's Legal Clinic. Access to Justice and the Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program (CLCPP) funding currently give a combined \$2.25 million in grants to Bread for the City, one of our largest single sources of funding and the largest source of funding for our Legal Clinic. Over the years, with this stable source of funding, Bread for the City has been able to improve access to justice by, among other things, increasing the number of attorneys available to help District residents who cannot afford an attorney in matters concerning basic human rights, including maintaining safe, affordable housing and safety for families from domestic violence. For legal services organizations like Bread for the City, a sustained commitment from the city to funding civil legal services is critical to ensuring the existence of a legal safety net for the city's most marginalized residents.

For instance, Access to Justice Initiative funds have supported Bread of the City is helping District residents like Ms. H who filed for a Civil Protection Order and Custody case against the father of her young daughter. During the course of litigation in these cases, the father grew increasingly irate, yelling at Ms. H and her attorney in the courthouse hallway. The father threatened to kill Ms. H and her new boyfriend and followed her to the metro station. A Bread for the City attorney filed an emergency motion to modify the temporary custody order. At the emergency hearing, the attorney put on evidence of the recent threats and the Judge found that the child and Ms. H were at risk of imminent risk of harm. The judge modified the order to restrict the father's visitation to the Court's Supervised Visitation Center. The additional restriction on the father's visitation helped keep Ms. H safe from further harm and gave her the security she needed to focus on herself and raising her young child.

Most recently in this past fiscal year, we used Access to Justice Initiative funds to support the creation of the Eviction Diversion Project. The project aims to prevent evictions by reaching tenants at risk of

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displacement as early as possible and connecting them with the supports and services they need to stabilize their housing. The project is a joint collaboration between the six CLCPP, or Civil Legal Counsel Projects Program Providers and six community-based organization Partners. This new project puts resources and support further up-stream, engaging in intensive outreach that educates tenants on their rights before an eviction case is filed. We offer District residents a more wholistic approach to preserving housing by providing attorneys AND tenant support advocates who assist tenants in accessing multiple different types of supports, such as financial, utility, mental health, public benefits, and moving supports. This novel approach to preserving housing stability ultimately saves the District the additional expenses that result from when families are forced into homelessness through the eviction.

Since 2018, Bread for the City's Legal Clinic has expanded its offerings to also provide representation in immigration matters. The Legal Clinic has assisted DC residents in obtaining visas to live and work lawfully in the United States, applying for permanent resident status, and ensuring the reunification of separated children and parents. For undocumented immigrants living in the District, obtaining lawful status enables them to contribute to the city's economy in measurable ways, and provides the foundation for their children and family members to build safe and healthy lives in D.C.

While much of the work of our Legal Clinic can be quantified in court case outcomes, there is a value to the work that evades data – that is the significance for our Black and brown residents to have an attorney and an organization that has their backs. From 2000 to 2020, the District saw its Black population drop from 59% to 41%. Low-income residents are being pushed out of this city at some of the fastest rates in the country. One cannot emphasize enough the impact of this loss for our city. Black families and entire communities who have lived together, supported each other for generations, and built this city have been forced out. Our clients report to us that the message our city sends to them is that they do not belong in this city, the city's leadership does not value them, and that their history does not matter. The Access to Justice Initiative is our city's commitment to stopping this forced exodus. Our attorneys serve as advocates inside and outside the courtroom, reminding all who will listen that low-income residents of the District matter. Without the meaningful access to justice this funding provides, the District risks silencing the voices of our low-income residents, limiting their ability to exercise their rights, and perpetuating racial and economic disparities. Our clients deserve a place, a home, and safety in the nation's capital and this funding is the District's promise that it will do everything it can to work with us and our colleague organizations to ensure that low-income and Black and brown families have a place in this city.

Bread for the City thanks the D.C. Council for its longstanding support of the Access to Justice Initiative, and we urge the Council to restore the funding to the amount allocated last fiscal year, \$31 million.

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