

April 10, 2023

I am the Executive Director of DC KinCare Alliance, and respectfully request that the DC Council fully fund the Access to Justice (ATJ) Initiative so that DC legal services organizations can continue to serve those most in need in our community in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. DC KinCare Alliance was founded in 2017 to support the legal, financial, and related service needs of relative caregivers (predominantly grandmothers) who step up to raise DC children in their extended families in times of crisis when the children's parents are not able to care for them due to mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration, death, abuse and neglect, and deportation. Approximately 22,000 Black and brown DC children are living in kinship care arrangements, representing about 20% of all DC children of color. The majority of these children live at or near the poverty level, have experienced trauma, and are at grave risk for poor physical, emotional, and educational outcomes. Research shows that kinship care can be a powerful stabilizing force for these children, changing the trajectory of their lives for the better.

The specific needs we address—the inability to access legal rights, economic security, housing, food, financial opportunities, health care, and other supports and services—are those faced by all low-income, under-resourced communities of color, but are exacerbated for kinship families because they are not recognized by the systems that are supposed to help and support them. Our goal is to eliminate this unequal treatment by using a threefold approach: (1) providing direct legal representation to caregivers to obtain legal rights and financial benefits; (2) furnishing information and education about these rights and benefits; and (3) using advocacy and impact litigation to break down systemic barriers.

***DC KinCare Alliance is the only organization in DC focused solely on serving relative caregivers raising DC's at-risk children.*** DC KinCare Alliance's unique and innovative approach to helping these caregivers provides a ***one-stop-shop*** to receive legal support for all of their varied needs. No other organization in the country combines education, legal services, and advocacy together as one solution for relative caregivers. Providing all of these services is the key to achieving lasting change in our clients' lives. ***Our accomplishments over the 5 years since our founding include: providing legal services to more than 600 relative caregivers raising over 700 at-risk DC children in more than 700 legal matters; establishing a free legal helpline and court walk-in clinic; holding more than 20 community groups to educate stakeholders about kinship family needs, legal rights and resources; and distributing more than 2,000 copies of our DC Relative Caregiver Legal Resource Guide. Finally, we have broken down barriers for kinship caregivers to access critical supports and services.***

Commencing with our 5<sup>th</sup> year of operations in 2022, we received ATJ funding for the first time. This funding enabled us to double in size from 2 to 4 attorneys, and to provide legal services to more than 200 relatives in over 225 legal matters, more than any other year in our history. We saw a **100% increase** in the number of clients we served in 2022, and a 50% increase in the number of legal matters in which we provided help. In the first quarter of 2023, we have already provided legal services to **50% more clients** as compared to the first quarter of 2022, with demand for our services continuing to grow.