



**Testimony of Sandy Bernstein, Legal Director  
Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services  
District of Columbia City Council  
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety**

As the Legal Director at Disability Rights DC (DRDC) at University Legal Services, I submit this testimony to urge the DC City Council to ensure there is adequate funding for the Access to Justice Initiative in the District of Columbia's Fiscal Year 2024 budget. DRDC receives this critical funding, administered by the DC Bar Foundation, which has allowed us to provide legal representation and advocacy to low income District residents with mental illness and intellectual and developmental disabilities who have housing-related legal needs.

With the funding DRDC receives from the Access to Justice Initiative for our Housing Advocacy for People with Psychiatric and Developmental Disabilities Project, we have been able to advocate for people with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness, living in unsafe or substandard housing placements, 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 in their Department of Behavioral Health's or Department on Disability Services' housing placements, sought reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities in private and public housing and represented individuals facing reduction or termination of their needed Medicaid home health aide services.

This funding has allowed DRDC to represent people with disabilities at serious risk of harm. For example, DRDC represented a young man who has a psychiatric disability and a developmental disability who was living in a dark and musty basement and not receiving the supports he needed. He would leave his home unsupervised, sometimes without shoes or a coat.

He was so upset about his living situation that he was hospitalized after trying to take his own life. DRDC represented him and successfully advocated for services from the D.C.

Developmental Disabilities Administration, providing documentation that he meets their eligibility criteria. Knowing that he could not wait months for his services and housing to be in place, DRDC then advocated for an emergency placement and services for him. He is now living in a residential placement he loves and is receiving supports 24 hours a day.

The Access to Justice Initiative allows DRDC to represent people with disabilities, like this young man, and help them obtain the housing and residential services they need and to which they are entitled. The need now is especially great, with the end of the public health emergency, which will mean possible reductions and terminations of Medicaid home health aide services for people with significant medical and clinical needs. These services allow people with disabilities to maintain their housing in the community. We also continue to receive numerous calls from people with psychiatric and developmental disabilities who are homeless or living in substandard housing and not getting the services they need from District providers. Without funding from the Access to Justice Initiative, we would not be able to provide the advocacy and representation needed to District residents with these critical needs.

DRDC appreciates the City Council's leadership and support for legal services to the District's low income residents and requests the Council secure adequate funding for the Access to Justice Initiative in the District's FY24 budget.