**Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment (DC SAFE)**

**Budget Hearing - Child and Family Services Administration**

**Committee on Facilities and Family Services - DC Council**

**April 25, 2024**

Thank you Chairperson Lewis George and members of the committee. My name is Michelle Sewell. I am the Crisis Shelter Director for DC SAFE. We serve as a critical component in the city’s public safety infrastructure as the only 24/7 crisis intervention agency for domestic violence.

At DC SAFE, while we have a focus on crisis services and support for individuals experiencing domestic violence, we also approach our work with the understanding that we must consider the whole person and all of the complexities of their lives if our safety planning is to be successful. This is perhaps never so apparent than when our clients are seeking emergency placement. Providing crisis shelter for families and individuals gives us a unique perspective on our clients and we see the need for a deep well of community support for clients, perhaps more so now than ever as we have expanded our shelter capacity and services with our new facility in 2023.

Partnerships with existing support systems and agencies involved in a clients’ lives as well as connecting survivors to new resources through our collaborative work is essential to helping them stabilize and continue their journey to safety. A proactive collaboration with outside agencies not only help the whole person feel supported but can help ease client fear and concern that they are voiceless in a process where there is an inherent power imbalance.

For clients who are connected with Children and Family Services, this collaboration is especially important. Whether the client is coming into shelter with existing case managers, an open case with CFSA or when we are compelled to call with concerns, being able to work in partnership with CFSA personnel is essential. However, there is often a problem of trust in situations where CFSA is involved. As we have previously testified, we are happy to see CFSA move toward a more supportive and less punitive approach to families at risk in the community. Historic and cultural fear is persistent, and many of the clients we work with are concerned their voice will not be heard. These cultural and historic fears will take time to heal.

Beyond time, we believe that the CFSA budget can be an essential part of creating better outcomes for survivors whose lives intersect with CFSA.

Providing robust funding for staff and programing through CFSA can go a long way in building trust both for individuals and the community. Therefore, we are troubled by the flat funding of CFSA in the FY25 budget. Our experience with CFSA and many of our other social service partners is that front line staff is often overtaxed and underprepared. High caseloads and staff turnover create barriers in forming relationships and completing the detail-oriented work needed to truly make a family feel supported or to properly investigate concerns.

In addition, commitment to collaboration and partnership with outside resources is necessary for a successful outcome. This is more than just being able to provide a phone number or location for resources to DV survivors and others in the community to seek services. Having the time and capacity to meet, make plans, circle back, reevaluate, and sustain collaboration is key, both as a means to success but also to gain trust and by in from clients and community stakeholders.

Our experience is that there seems to be a lack of capacity for this work that would indicate that more investment is necessary. As such, we are troubled by cuts to budgets for services like the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Involvement As the city as a whole looks for means to tighten its belt, we must emphasize that it can not be at the expense of its most vulnerable citizens or the very necessary agencies working to support them. That includes robust funding for direct service staffing as well as in support of collaborative measures which often must begin in leadership. Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to any questions!