



## **SURVIVORS AND ADVOCATES FOR EMPOWERMENT**

Supporting and Empowering Domestic Violence Survivors since 1997  
Apoyando a Víctimas de Violencia Doméstica desde 1997

**Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment, Inc. (DC SAFE) (1/3)**  
**Budget Oversight Hearing - Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice**  
**Committee on Public Safety & the Judiciary - April 10th, 2024**

Good morning Chairperson Pinto and members of the committee,

My name is Natalia Otero and I co-founded DC SAFE in 2006 with my friend Elisabeth Olds. (I'm sure you know her from her advocacy on the SAVVRA continuum.) In my tenure at DCSAFE, I have personally supported thousands of survivors, I have ridden along with police officers as they responded to DV calls, and I have met clients at any time of the day or night to place them in a hotel for their safety.

I want you to know that I walk the walk. I have stood next to clients in court, I have stood by families of homicide victims as they seek justice and I have stood next to our clients hospital beds as they heal..and today I am here to stand up for them.

Last time I testified before this council on this particular agency, I said I was here to sound the alarm bells. Since then I am saddened to report that we have lost another person to homicide! Anesha Isaac's sounded the alarm bells herself. She did everything she could to stay safe and hold her aggressor accountable. I am so impressed by her tenacity and composure. I had the pleasure of meeting her family and their love and support for each other and for her was overwhelming. Even after 20 years of doing this hard work it really hits hard.

Ms. Isaacs family would like you to know that their daughter was a strong and brave woman, who fought to the end with all she had in her to keep herself safe. Their daughter made sure she had a Protective Order in MD, DC, and VA. Their daughter was a loving and caring young woman with a Blessed and Great future ahead of her.... they will Cherish the years, and Memories they have in their hearts for her Forever...

I am immensely proud of the work we do but it does have a tangible toll. Her advocate, Karissa, knows her stuff. She is companionate and smart, and as a senior advocate, she has 20+ years of experience. She wanted me to share this with you, that losing someone at such a young age is never easy, but losing



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someone to domestic violence makes it that much harder. Domestic violence is an epidemic, and yet we don't address it until someone gets murdered. Survivors of domestic violence deserve better, they deserve to be heard, helped and maintain their safety and dignity.

We knew that Anesha Issac was at high risk even before the tragedy and if we didn't do everything we could to help her, then we failed. And by we I mean you and me too. When I sit up here and ask you for a "political commitment" I am asking you to show up for all of us. I am asking you to make a strategic investment of money, yes. But more than that I ask that you listen to advocates, families, and victims themselves. Because unfortunately hindsight is 20/20, and they leave a brutal recounting of what happened to them. I ask that you follow up with us after the hearing and try to dig into what we are seeing and what we are asking you to do.

So often advocates have a reputation for constantly criticizing efforts, policies and practices and never being satisfied. That is not how we see this work. We are grateful for the partners we have in this work, many of them District government agencies who work tirelessly side by side with us to keep District residents safe every day.

As you listen to my colleagues, try not to just think of us as coming here to ask for money, but think of us as people who have dedicated all of our brains, hearts, and soul's to empathizing and dissecting these tragedies in hopes of preventing the next one.

Natalia Otero

Co-Founder & Executive Director



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### **Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment, Inc. (DC SAFE) (2/3)**

#### **Budget Oversight Hearing - Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice**

#### **Committee on Public Safety & the Judiciary - April 10th, 2024**

Good morning Chairperson Pinto and esteemed members of the committee,

I am Nicole Walter, Supportive Advocacy Team Director at DC SAFE. As a follow-up to Natalia's heartfelt testimony just now, I stand before you with a heavy heart to address the urgent need for both ideological and fiscal commitment from the Deputy Mayor's Office and the DC Council to support the High-Risk Domestic Violence Initiative, also known as the HRDVI.

As the District's only 24/7 crisis intervention agency for survivors, DC SAFE has been at the helm of the HRDVI for over 15 years. The HRDVI is filled with hard-working, dedicated public servants from 17 District and federal government agencies and nonprofit organizations. I can assure you that this group isn't being stifled by a lack of innovative ideas or commitment on the ground, but by a lack of political support from the top.

Firstly, regarding the ideological commitment we are calling for:

DC SAFE testified on this same issue a couple months ago at the performance oversight hearing. To be extremely clear, we are simply asking that the City Administrator signs an updated and expanded order that governs the HRDVI. The order has not been amended in any way since it was first signed in 2009. We have already co-created the new order with the City Administrator's general counsel so that we can take the next steps in collaborating on this already established District-wide response to high risk domestic violence cases. That is all.



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The explicit endorsement of the administration is paramount at this point in ensuring that the participating government agencies can move forward on our collective plans to refine and improve processes within the HRDVI.

Secondly, regarding the fiscal piece of our ask:

I want to be clear that we are not bringing this issue forth simply to argue for additional funds. In fact, we have been building this project with highly variable funding for it for 15 years, though we do make a specific request of OVSJG every year and are currently attempting to apply for additional federal funds.

However, post-2020, we are operating in a new environment of help seeking patterns, virtual contact, and changed needs that have **not** reverted to a pre-2020 baseline and likely won't for the foreseeable future. We have also seen the impact of this change in the domestic violence homicide rate. Ultimately, the pandemic forced us to take a critical look at how we as an organization and as a community are structured, what we have the capacity to provide, and what we really need to be sustainable, effective, and innovative.

DC SAFE supports the Victim Assistance Network's ask for a \$51M baseline funding level for OVSJG, knowing that this is a leap from where the City has been in terms of what they are capable of providing to its residents from the past. We feel this is what is necessary to properly support the reality of our "new normal." And if not achievable this year, it must be a long term goal that we commit to meeting. Additionally, we support the VAN's secondary ask for \$21M to support new and expanded programs. Without either or both funding asks prioritized in the FY25 budget, we will continue to be both unsustainable and stagnant on our growth.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Nicole Walter

Supportive Advocacy Team Director



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### **Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment, Inc. (DC SAFE) (3/3)**

#### **Budget Oversight Hearing - Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice**

#### **Committee on Public Safety & the Judiciary - April 10, 2024**

Thank you Chairperson Pinto and esteemed members of the committee.

My name is Jake Emerson and I am DC SAFE's board treasurer. Professionally, I'm a Senior Vice President at Capital Bank, a community bank headquartered in Montgomery County, Maryland.

I became involved with DC SAFE in 2021. I participated in financing the construction of the organization's new shelter facility, which delivered last summer.

Since then, I've been an avid supporter of the organization and I was honored to join the board in 2023. I have chosen to devote a tremendous amount of my personal resources to DC SAFE because of the undeniable impact the organization has on our community.

In many of DC's peer cities, the government is responsible for the services that DC SAFE so excellently provides here in the District. DC SAFE provides a cost-savings for the District in two specific areas. First, the District is not responsible for providing direct services to domestic violence survivors. Second, DC SAFE is actively preventing crimes that have a high fiscal impact on the City and its residents. For example, we estimate that a single homicide in the District, from arrest to incarceration, costs the government \$2,000,000 (Urban Institute, 2008). For context, DC SAFE's entire annual operating budget is approximately \$7,000,000 and we achieve an incredible scale of impact.

The following are impressive statistics regarding our work in 2023.

- We effectively handled 42,840 incoming calls from Public Safety cluster;
- We provided critical intervention for 12,328 domestic violence survivors;
- We guided 3,759 clients through court processes;
- We provided 712 nights of safe shelter;
- And we trained over 2,200 MPD officers.

70% of DC SAFE's annual operating budget is funded by District grants. The primary sources are from OVSJG and DHS. While that percentage may seem high, I want to reiterate that if not for DC SAFE, the District would be responsible for providing these services.

A primary goal of DC SAFE's board is to diversify its funding sources. We have recently increased our private revenue by over 300%. However, this impressive growth has not kept pace with the demands for our services, which increased significantly during the pandemic and have not decreased post pandemic.

Unfortunately, the current level of funding we receive from the City is inadequate. The City has recently taken steps to invest significantly in crime reduction, homicide prevention, and gun control. It is concerning to DC SAFE's board that domestic violence services have not been included in this modified strategy, despite it being clear that reducing domestic violence will make our community safer.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to our continued partnership to improve public safety.