

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

**Budget Oversight Hearing - Department of Human Services (DHS)**

**Committee on Housing- DC Council**

**April 5, 2024**

Thank you, Chairperson White and members of the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Jenny Wesberry and I am the Director of Operations at DC SAFE.

DC SAFE serves a critical role in the city's public safety infrastructure as the only 24/7 crisis intervention agency for domestic violence. Last year, we received over 42,000 calls to our Response Line including almost 17,000 individual referrals. We also recently opened a new 30 unit crisis shelter with the capacity to house 700 survivors per year.

Since our inception in 2006, DHS has been an important program partner, specifically through the city's High Risk Domestic Violence Initiative and our work to identify and triage services for those who are the highest risk for re-assault or homicide. When we started our shelter program in 2011, they became a closer partner, as our work with clients expanded to housing. And then in 2018, they became a funder of our work, supporting domestic violence services for clients receiving TANF benefits, as well as supporting both our shelter program and our COVID-19 response. New this fiscal year, DC SAFE has furthered our funding partnership once again as a grantee through the Homeless Prevention Program or HPP. In total for this fiscal year, DC SAFE receives \$1.3M from DHS, making up 18% of our organizational budget.

I want to take the time today to share our concerns around the Mayor's recently released budget and the impact that proposed cuts will have on survivors of domestic violence and their families, and the organizations like DC SAFE who serve them.

Firstly, DHS Family Homeless Services have been cut across the board for a total decrease of around \$33M -- As stated through our new HPP grant, we have also expanded our partnership to support clients in accessing rapid rehousing. The proposed cuts for FY25 are especially alarming given the dramatic changes DHS has already had to make this year, including

significant changes to the application and accessibility of ERAP funds and unexpected changes to rapid rehousing support. To our knowledge, we are the only HPP provider for DHS that can offer clients rapid rehousing right now. We are bracing for a bottleneck of referrals and now doubly concerned that this work may not even continue through FY25, albeit there is such a high volume of families in need.

Large cuts to social safety net programs including SNAP and childcare subsidies will also contribute to this pernicious cycle and very negatively impact our clients. So many of our clients rely on public benefits as their only financial lifeline when they are in the midst of leaving an abusive relationship. And the reality is that losing access to childcare, for example, can be the difference between choosing to leave an abusive partner or to stay with them. In fact, it can even be a matter of life and death.

Just a few weeks ago, our organization was devastated by the tragic domestic violence homicide of DC resident and our former client, Anesha Issacs. Her death serves as a painful reminder of our city's insufficient investment in comprehensive intervention and homicide prevention for domestic violence.

The proposed budget cuts for DHS will undoubtedly further the social inequities that aggravate violence in our community. And moreover, they will continue to deteriorate the systems we have in place to prevent deaths like Anesha's. As I mentioned, DC SAFE leads the city's High Risk Domestic Violence Initiative, of which DHS is a key member. We are currently pushing for an updated City Administrator's Order to govern the work of the Initiative. However, even if a new order is signed, its impact will be hamstrung by these budget cuts.

Housing is safety. Financial autonomy is safety. Survivors and families will be more at risk should these cuts go through.

As such, we urge the committee to find a way to protect DHS' family homelessness and social safety net programs in FY25. That said, restoring funding would be just a bandaid at this point. We stand firmly with the Victim Assistance Network in their request for a 25% increase in



## **SURVIVORS AND ADVOCATES FOR EMPOWERMENT**

Supporting and Empowering Domestic Violence Survivors since 1997

Apoyando a Víctimas de Violencia Doméstica desde 1997

funding to FY24 funding levels for all District agency budgets that serve victims in the DC, including DHS.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to any questions.