

Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants: Budget Oversight Hearing, April 13, 2023
Testimony of Bridgette Stumpf, NVRDC Executive Director

Thank you Chairwoman Pinto, other Committee members, and staff. My name is Bridgette Stumpf and I am the co-founder and executive director at Network for Victim Recovery of DC (NVRDC). Our organization aims to create survivor-defined justice through three pathways: 1. Empowering survivors through direct services such as free crisis response, advocacy, legal and therapeutic support; 2. Culture Shifting the cross-sector experiences of survivors through educating the community and leaders about the impact of crime and the role of response systems in restoration; and 3. Transforming Systems to ensure equitable healing that is responsive to the needs of survivors and their communities.

Since inception in 2012, we have provided direct services to over 8,800 individuals affected by violence. We are committed to ensuring that the systems available to survivors are responsive to their diverse needs and are appropriately resourced in order to mitigate the consequences of trauma. The proposed cuts to the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG), with over \$7 million slashed from the victim services arm of the agency, does not reflect a public safety investment decision that is prioritizing and centering the impact of crime and trauma on DC's residents. Furthermore, failing to fund support structures post-victimization, results in significant and unintended community safety costs.

In FY22, NVRDC supported over 1,180 survivors of crime. Of these clients, 57% experienced sexual assault, 82% identified as female/feminine-of-center, 46% identified as Black, 15% white, and 12% Hispanic/Latine and the majority were ages 18-34. The majority of clients (18%) reside in Ward 8, followed by Ward 7 (15%), 2 (14.5%), and 6 (14%) respectively. The advocacy team served 436 new clients (312 of whom accessed advocacy when reporting sexual assault to MPD or when receiving a medical forensic exam (SANE)). The legal program handled 646 active matters (onboarding 565 new cases). This is a reflection of the current increased capacity tax on providers that has not subsided since the residual effects of the pandemic exacerbated the needs survivors have post-victimization.

Last year, NVRDC advocates responded to the hospital over 260 times, spending nearly 600 hours at the emergency room, and assisting 75 additional survivors of sexual assault when they reported to police. Given our unique model, these advocates continue to support survivors to ensure timely follow-up for HIV prevention medication access, Crime Victims Compensation applications, referrals to housing and in-house mental health, and streamlined connections to NVRDC's legal team, where the advocates continue to provide support to their clients during the pendency of the clients' legal cases. This output doesn't even consider the additional 169 clients advocates on-boarded through our office intake. While the expansion of the right to an advocate for survivors under the Sexual Assault Victims' Rights Amendment Act (SAVRAA) resourced additional partners to support crisis response needs of survivors, NVRDC's advocacy team served more victims of crime last year (783 total) despite having to only staff the acute crisis response for the hospital 50% of the time—compared to years prior where we oversaw 100% of the response for adult sexual assault survivors.

Even if OVSJG's FY24 budget sustained this year's SAVRAA funding levels, it would be \$332,000 short of what is needed to support the current volume (57% increase as of April 12, 2023 compared to same time the prior year) and complexity of staffing needed to continue maintenance of the 24/7 crisis advocacy response.

Without this additional support, NVRDC will experience advocacy staffing shortages that will close our office intakes for approximately 3 months next year. Based on need this year, this means approximately 42 survivors of crime would be told we cannot help them. Procedurally, it would be extremely beneficial for the committee to consider recurring allocation to SAVRAA year-over-year so that providers can strategically plan for gaps while continuing to adequately meet survivors' current needs and establish recurring local funding to OVSJG's budget to meet the required baseline dedicated funding level for Victim Services.

Forecasting for cuts beyond FY23 funding levels will also potentially eliminate our Elder Abuse coalition work known as DC TROV and cause other programs to limit services and/or entry points. This will be particularly impactful for those services unique to NVRDC, such as our specialized wraparound legal representation for youth survivors of dating and domestic violence, sexual assault and/or stalking in the District.

Our youth services team saw a 22% increase in clients served last year, yet our current award was \$32,000 short of what was requested to meet FY23 needs. Our community cannot afford to underinvest in supporting youth survivors of violence. Serving youth survivors' complex needs effectively requires youth-focused and extremely accessible services. Funding this project is a critical way to support this underserved population of crime victims and to ensure that youth survivors accessing advocacy rights under SAVRAA are able to receive ongoing support as their needs evolve beyond the acute crisis response. Without support for NVRDC's program, many, if not most, of these victims in DC will go unserved—this is particularly difficult if the need is something unique to the support that NVRDC's offers such as Title IX representation, crime victims' rights litigation and/or appellate advocacy.

Access to these services and other legal aid is deeply tied to overall enhanced access to healthcare, reduces medical debt, and improved health outcomes. [Research shows](#) having access to legal aid services can reduce stress, improve the health of children, and assist vulnerable populations, like LGBTQ and seniors. Access to Justice Initiative funding must be restored to FY23 funding levels. This year was the first in many where NVRDC's Victim Legal Network of DC (VLNDC) project, which is partially supported by Access to Justice Funds, received an increase. While the funding increased by 44%, the requests in services have gone up by 120%. This no-wrong-door, coordinated entry for victims of all crimes to access wraparound legal assistance has revolutionized many of the barriers that prevent survivors in DC from receiving support—mitigating the ongoing costs of this trauma. A cut back to FY22 levels would cause significant shutdowns of intake and a bottleneck to connecting victims with the over 25 legal service providers that served clients in 573 cases last year related to housing, immigration, benefits, civil protection orders, and other critical civil justice necessary after experiencing victimization.

However, cuts in OVSJG's budget will also limit NVRDC's ability to find innovative alternatives to support survivors who do not wish to engage with traditional reporting options within the legal

system, like restorative justice. While best practices in the victim services field have shifted to encourage wraparound models of care offering both supportive advocacy and free legal assistance, [recent data](#) explains that many survivors of crime want additional options outside of punitive responses to harm. The Alliance for Safety and Justice found in the first-ever national survey focused on victims' views of safety and justice, that by a 3 to 1 margin, victims would prefer to hold people who cause harm accountable through options beyond prison, such as rehabilitation, mental health treatment, drug treatment, community supervision, and restorative justice options. Through a collaboration with Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop (Free Minds), NVRDC continues to partner to invest in and expand restorative options that support individuals who have experienced harm while incarcerated, and to provide engagement in restorative justice options for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youths and adults in order to further community healing. The current funding for this project is extremely limited to only IRAA related proceedings and needs increased investment to ensure restorative justice access of survivors not currently involved in the criminal legal process.

NVRDC sits at a unique vantage point to see the needs of survivors who sit at the margins of budget advocacy due to lack of coalition support, historically being underserved, and often not acknowledged as crime victims. We are privileged to support survivors who experience any form of violence with services that have focused on underserved survivors of gun violence and surviving family members of homicide. Without restoration of FY23 funding levels innovative medical-legal partnerships to address the root causes of violence may be impacted. Additionally, cuts to OVSJG's FY23 budget leave questions about how implementation of initiatives under Expanding Supports for Crime Victims will happen in practice and not become more empty promises that exist only on paper for survivors. We feel strongly that taking steps to legislate rights and services that move toward more equity in victim services are meaningless if not backed by investments.

In short, survivors and those advocates on the frontlines supporting them cannot bear the brunt of funding cuts. Given the ripple effects unaddressed trauma has on individuals, their families, employers, and larger communities, cutting victim services for cost-savings on the front-end costs communities exponentially more on the back-end. [Recent research](#) suggests that the cost of adverse outcomes that result from lack of treatment for crime victims costs society more than \$458 million each year, with a lifetime tally of more than \$194,000 per individual. As the Council makes difficult budgeting decisions, we hope that adequate funding for survivor services will be prioritized. At a minimum that means restoring both the Access to Justice Initiative and OVSJG victim services budget to FY23 funding levels. The real cost to serve all survivors is actually much beyond that when considering the additional \$888,000 for other needs related to restorative justice, SAVRAA, and organizational capacity to ensure continuation funding of innovative medical legal partnership serving gun violence victims and surviving family members of homicide.

Thank you for your continued support of survivors and please contact us with any questions.