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**Center for Family Representation (CFR)
Testimony to the General Welfare and Finance Committees of the
New York City Council**

Hearing Date: May 6th, 2024

Center for Family Representation (CFR) is grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony to the New York City Council on the FY 25 budget. We thank you for providing this opportunity and for your support of CFR. We urge you to ensure that this year's City budget adequately funds critical legally mandated representation to parents prosecuted by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), and maintains or increases Council discretionary funding for those initiatives that support legal services for indigent New Yorkers.

Overview of CFR

CFR is the county-wide, assigned indigent defense provider offering interdisciplinary legal representation to parents being investigated or prosecuted by ACS in Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx. We have represented more than 2,000 clients in the last FY. Over 90% of our clients are Black, brown, or people of color.

CFR employs an interdisciplinary model of parent defense, assigning each client an attorney and a social worker. Our teams are supported by Parent Advocates, parents who have been investigated and prosecuted by ACS and who can support clients from a place of empathy and understanding. Our interdisciplinary teams are able to address the underlying issues that lead families into the system, connecting families with quality mental health treatment, substance abuse programs, basic necessities, and educational services for children with special needs to ensure that families remain together or are reunited as quickly as possible.

We are requesting your support in urging the city to provide:

- \$425,000 for our *Home for Good* Program, which offers holistic support for parents and youth, • \$150,000 in DoVE funding to provide enhanced social work services for clients who are survivors of domestic violence,
- And \$825,000 for the *Right To Family Advocacy Program*, which offers representation to parents during ACS investigations and at administrative hearings to amend and seal reports with the State Central Register (SCR).

We ask City Council to increase support of CFR's *Home for Good* Program which is Critical to Bringing Stability to Manhattan Families and Continued City Savings

CFR launched its Home for Good program in 2015, which offers wraparound legal and social work support in areas like housing, public benefits, criminal court, and immigration. Over our years of experience, we observed that our clients rarely experience problems in neat silos, and often involvement with ACS leads to challenges in other systems, and vice versa. Offering a one stop solution to this range of challenges allows CFR to address each family's needs swiftly, collaboratively, and most effectively, with practitioners who understand the impact of the ACS case on the multiple other systems our clients face. Resolving our client's collateral matters, means families are reunified more quickly and children spend less time in the foster system or avoid it altogether, thereby saving the City money. CFR's city contract does not fund critical assistance in these collateral areas, despite the link between collateral

challenges and family stability.

We ask City Council to Increase our Funding through the DoVE Initiative to Provide Enhanced Social Work Services to Survivors of Domestic Violence

DoVE funding from City Council helps support CFR's interdisciplinary model by providing intensive social work services to our clients who identify as survivors of domestic violence. Social work staff complete assessments to determine the needed services for a family and make appropriate referrals that address not only the issues of violence, but also consider the client's cultural background, to ensure survivors of domestic violence are able to remain safely with their children. CFR social work staff also find appropriate referrals for services for our non-citizen clients who need either free or sliding scale services, which are difficult to locate.

The Need for CFR's Services for Families Continues to Outpace CFR's Resources, Particularly with Respect to Critical Social Work Support and Assistance with Housing, Immigration, Public Benefits and in Criminal Matters.

The families CFR serves continue to experience persistent instability and housing insecurity, while the City is deeply cutting funding for social services that could offer more stability and support to families. New York City's affordable housing crisis and the arrival of large numbers of migrant families contribute to our City's record-breaking homeless population, creating further challenges for survivors of domestic violence and even more need for housing, education, immigration, and public benefits assistance for CFR's clients.

With this increased need, CFR's teams continue to work harder than ever, in and outside of court, to protect the rights of parents and youth and to keep families safely together. CFR's interdisciplinary model has continued to meet these needs, but cannot keep up with the demand for these services, particularly with the increase of clients in need of immigration services. City Council discretionary funding for CFR's *Home for Good* Program and *DoVE* funding supporting social work services for survivors of domestic violence are essential for CFR to continue to be able to meet the growing needs of New York City (NYC) families.

We ask City Council to Increase Funding for the *Right to Family Advocacy Program* in FY 2024

Since FY 2020, CFR has been representing parents through its *Right to Family Advocacy Program* (RTFA) during ACS investigations to prevent court filings and family separations and in hearings at the SCR to protect and expand parents' employment opportunities, thanks to funding from City Council. CFR's results demonstrate the need for continued City Council funding of RTFA. For those families CFR represented during an investigation in FY 2023, *CFR prevented a court filing 77% of the time and helped 85% of the children, a total of 203, avoid the foster system.* For those parents who stayed engaged with CFR through the SCR hearing, *98% had their records amended and sealed,* allowing them to more easily find and retain employment and support their families. These services are essential to the integrity and stability of NYC families.

Conclusion

We are grateful for the invaluable opportunity to share more information about CFR and the need for adequate funding for legally mandated representation of parents facing prosecution from ACS, including support of the *Right to Family Advocacy Program*, and discretionary funding to support CFR's interdisciplinary wrap-around services and social work support for survivors of domestic violence. Thank you for your commitment to CFR and ensuring that New Yorkers have access to interdisciplinary family defense services that they need to thrive, and which allow them to remain safely with their children and families. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to CFR's Executive Director, Tehra Coles, at tcoles@cfrny.org or 646-838-2776.