

Submitted Written Testimony of

Veronica Gonzalez,
Board Member, Legal Aid Chicago
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Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

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Thank you Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Graham for the opportunity to share about my experience with civil legal aid and how legal representation impacted my life and the lives of my children.

My name is Veronica Gonzalez and I serve on the governing board of Legal Aid Chicago, the LSC funded organization for Cook County, Illinois. I have been a board member for five years. Before becoming a board member I was a client of Legal Aid Chicago. Their representation kept me and my son safe.

I am originally from Chicago, but I dropped out of high school when I was 16 and went with my boyfriend and his family to Washington state. Though I did not want to go, I felt pressure to do so. My son was born there. I was 18 years old and was isolated from my family. My boyfriend was physically abusive and threatened to take my son away if I ever left him. I tried to get away many times, once making it to the safety of my uncle's home in Minnesota after he punched me in the face, but he always convinced me to return, promising he would change. Though I hoped he would keep his word, the abuse continued.

He physically abused me in front of my son- punching me in the face and ripping out chunks of my hair and leaving me with a bald spot the size of a quarter. He controlled where I went and took the wages I earned from working at Chuck E Cheese. His parents also abused me— limiting where I could go and when I could leave the house. Once his mother dragged me back into the home as I ran out, trying to call the police because my son's father was kicking and punching me. She watched her son kick me, hit me, and pull me by my hair- and saw that her grandson was right there, but did nothing to stop the abuse.

In 2016, when my son was three years old, I took him for his annual medical checkup. I saw this as my chance to ask for help away from the ears and eyes of my boyfriend and his family. I told my son's pediatrician and a nurse about the abuse and showed her my scalp and bruises. They photographed my lip swollen from his punches and my other injuries and helped me make a plan to become safe.

I told my boyfriend that my son needed to return to the clinic a few days later for another test. Once again, he refused to allow me to go alone to the appointment but the doctor asked him to stay in the waiting room while I went with my son to the examination room. From there the doctor and her staff helped me and my son escape out the clinic's back door. We hid in the trunk of a clinic employee's car and rode that way for five miles until we were clear it was safe because my son's father tried to block the parking lot exit. We were dropped off at a domestic violence shelter, which then helped us return to Illinois and my family. We fled with nothing but the clothes on our backs.

I was so scared. Even though he was many miles away, I still knew that he could easily find me—he knew where my family lived—and could hurt me and my son. Within a day of returning to Chicago I went to court to get an Order of Protection to keep myself and my son safe. A law student helped me get the emergency order but because I had come from out of state, I was told my case was very complicated and I would need to find an attorney to represent me. I had no money to hire an attorney, and my family couldn't afford one. I was turned down by several legal aid organizations because of the complexity of my case but was eventually connected to Legal Aid Chicago who began to represent me.

My son's father hired attorneys in Washington state and Chicago who tried to dismiss the Order of Protection and filed a custody case in Washington, asking for my son to be taken from Illinois and returned to Washington to live with him.

My attorney at Legal Aid Chicago contacted the Northwest Justice Project, which is the LSC funded organization in Washington. They agreed to represent me in Washington. Though I had fled Washington to Illinois because of the physical abuse, the two courts had to decide which state would have jurisdiction over my case and therefore where my son should live, and which parent should have custody of him. There was a hearing where the judge in Washington and the judge in Illinois heard about the physical abuse, the reason why I fled with my son, and why Illinois should have jurisdiction over my case.

If not for the representation and coordination of my attorneys in Washington state and Chicago, I would have had to fight alone to protect myself and my son. After hearing the evidence and applying the law, the judges spoke and ruled that my case should continue in Chicago. Ultimately, Legal Aid Chicago represented me to receive a two year Order of Protection that protected me and my son and the court gave me sole custody. His father was ordered to pay child support and get services to address his violence.

Though I was living with my parents and my younger siblings, I was still afraid while all this was happening. When I was alone I would cry in the corner of their living room, reliving the

abuse and scared of what would happen to me and my son if I had to move across the country and to a place where I had no support and where he could easily continue to abuse me.

My life is now very different. I have a new partner and my son is a big brother. I returned to school and completed my Associate's Degree. At the Legal Aid Chicago Board meeting earlier this year, the entire board cheered for me when they learned that I got my degree. When considering what was next, I chose cosmetology school because I knew that people often feel safe when getting their hair or nails done and will confide in their stylists if they are experiencing abuse. I am currently a full-time student, on track to graduate next spring. I have been seriously hurt and I know that when I complete my training I will be able to use it to help others to find safety and direct them to legal services.

It is important to me to support civil legal aid and that is why I joined the board at Legal Aid Chicago. My legal case was complicated and I was in danger. Though there are thousands of women in Chicago and across the country who need legal help to end domestic violence, many cannot afford the high costs of a private attorney and have to go at it alone. I am very fortunate that I was represented by the attorneys at Legal Aid Chicago and the Northwest Justice Project.

Thank you for inviting me here today and for the chance to share my story to increase the number of survivors who can be helped by civil legal aid.