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**Statement of  
the Council for Court Excellence  
to the  
DC Council Committee on Human Services  
Concerning Oversight of the  
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

February 3, 2011

Good afternoon, Chairman Graham and members of the Committee. I am Priscilla Skillman, Assistant Director of the Council for Court Excellence. The Council for Court Excellence is a local, non-partisan civic organization that works in a variety of ways to improve the administration of justice in our city. For 29 years, the Council for Court Excellence has been a unique resource for our city, bringing together members of the civic, legal, business, and judicial communities to work in common purpose to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies. As is our policy, no judicial member of the Council for Court Excellence board of directors participated in preparing this statement.

The reform to date of the District's juvenile justice system has conformed the system to its longtime statutory mandate to hold delinquent youth accountable for their actions in the least restrictive setting that is consistent with their safety and the safety of the community. All national research studies confirm that such a system of accountability coupled with humane, rehabilitation services yields the best outcomes for both the delinquent youth and the community. We all want – and need – delinquent youth to be able to turn their lives around, build on their strengths, develop new skills, and become productive adults in our city.

As this committee, the Mayor, and the coming DC-Council-initiated Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform all focus on analysis of what is working well and what needs improvement, the Council for Court Excellence urges attention to the following important public policy questions so that the District can plan and budget for appropriate services:



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- Family Court judges place most adjudicated juveniles on probation, under the supervision of the DC Superior Court's Social Services Division. However, during the past eight years -- when juvenile arrests for serious crime have been relatively stable (and in fact have declined by 20.6% over the past four years) -- judicial commitments of delinquent youth to DYRS have increased dramatically: 134 in fiscal year 2003; 141 in 2004; 261 in 2005; 271 in 2006; 247 in 2007; 340 in 2008; 358 in 2009, and 332 in 2010. This surge in commitments was not predicted and has taxed the capacity of DYRS. What objective factors explain this dramatic increase? The Mayor's and the DC Council's ability to predict, plan, and budget for DYRS depends on being able to answer this question with precision, and we believe such research is essential.
- A significant proportion of the 60 beds at New Beginnings have been diverted from time to time to temporarily house youth who are awaiting transfer to another facility. This practice reduces the number of beds available for youth who need and would benefit from the intensive, six-months-or-longer rehabilitation programming that is the purpose of New Beginnings. The practice also impairs the operation of that rehabilitation program. Doesn't the District need to develop a separate facility or process for youth who are awaiting transfer so it can restore New Beginnings to its full 60-bed capacity?
- Does the District need more secure-bed capacity than the 60 beds available at New Beginnings, given the dramatic increase in judicial commitments of youth to DYRS over the past eight years, while New Beginnings was planned and built? Can this question even be answered before New Beginnings has a chance to operate as intended for a full year at its full capacity?
- Does the District need secure-bed capacity for committed girls, who are not served by New Beginnings?
- DYRS's performance plan anticipates that the agency will send 25% of all committed youth to out-of-area residential treatment and other facilities, a figure greatly exceeding the number of youth served close to home at New Beginnings. Doesn't placement far from home increase the difficulty for DYRS of planning with the youth, his or her family, and community providers for the youth's successful reentry to the District? Should the District rely so heavily on residential placements, when national research studies have



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found little evidence that such facilities provide quality treatment or rehabilitation? If residential treatment is warranted, shouldn't the District develop its own capacity for those committed youth who need such residential services, rather than sending those youth away to facilities far from home?

- The majority of youth committed to DYRS are being supervised within the DC community, not at New Beginnings or away in residential facilities. According to DYRS's performance plan, only 69% of newly committed youths in fiscal 2009 underwent a complete case-planning process and were in placements and receiving services that were consistent with their case plan; the agency's performance target on this measure for the 2010 fiscal year was 90%. The agency now relies on the private-sector Lead Entities to ensure that the DYRS-developed case plans for youth in community settings are being followed. Does the District have the robust system it needs to track the performance of the case managers at DYRS and the care coordinators at the two Lead Entities, to be sure they are developing thorough case plans and implementing those plans fully to provide supervision and rehabilitation to each delinquent youth who has been committed to DYRS?
- The coming Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform is charged with reporting on "an analysis of recidivism rates at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) and Court Social Services (CSS) over the last 3 years." Such a report will provide an important snapshot of outcome data, but shouldn't the Commission also be charged with establishing a data collection and reporting protocol that will provide recidivism (and other, positive outcome measures) data to the DC public on a regular basis after the Commission has completed its work?

Finally, as we do each time we testify about juvenile justice, the Council for Court Excellence urges this committee and the full DC Council to provide close attention to the performance of the District's whole juvenile justice system – including the Metropolitan Police Department, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Family Court, not simply DYRS. We recognize that the complexity of the District's governance structure, the DC Council's committee structure, and the fact that the Court is not locally funded, complicate doing so. However, the Superior Court does run the great majority of the



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District's juvenile justice system – supervising the great majority of adjudicated juveniles, who are placed on probation rather than committed to DYRS – and the results of this supervision are critical to understanding how the juvenile system as a whole is functioning.