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Statement of the Council for Court Excellence Before the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety and the Committee on Facilities and Procurement of the Council of the District of Columbia

“Moving the Office on Returning Citizen Affairs Amendment Act of 2019”
January 23, 2020

Good morning, Chairman Allen, Chairman White, and members of the committees. My name is Emily Tatro, and I am the Deputy Director for the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). For the past 37 years, CCE, a nonpartisan, nonprofit civic organization has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. No judicial members of CCE participated in the formulation of this testimony.

This testimony addresses Bill 23-0443, the “Moving the Office on Returning Citizen Affairs Amendment Act of 2019.” CCE supports this bill because the Office on Returning Citizen Affairs’ (ORCA’s) inclusion in the Public Safety & Justice (PSJ) cluster will better enable it to fulfill its statutory mission to “coordinate and monitor service delivery to returning citizens ... [and] promote the general welfare, empowerment, and reintegration of returning citizens in the areas of employment and workforce development, health care, education, housing, and social services.” D.C. Code §24-1302.

CCE is invested in ORCA's success. Since its inception in 2007, CCE has actively monitored and evaluated the impact of ORCA in the District.¹ We have assisted with the office's strategic planning and advocated for additional resources for the office and the returning citizens it serves. Additionally, we have studied the barriers and challenges faced by returning citizens in the District and issued recommendations related to improving reentry services.

From these efforts, CCE has learned that to accomplish its mission, ORCA must have open communication, coordinated strategies, and clearly-delineated accountability to and with other District agencies that touch reentry issues and support or serve returning citizens. Unfortunately, ORCA is not well-positioned to have these inter-agency collaborations, nor does it receive targeted support in the Community Affairs cluster; but it could if housed under Public Safety & Justice.

Misalignment of Goals in Community Affairs Cluster

The Mayor's Office of Community Affairs (MOCA) "is the essential connection between District of Columbia residents and the Executive Office of the Mayor."² MOCA ensures "open and continuous engagement" between residents and the Mayor through "partnerships with communities, conduct[ing] and coordinat[ing] events, town hall, forums, and projects."³ It is difficult to know precisely the annual goals of the cluster because MOCA has not publicly released Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) since FY 2011 or a Performance Accountability Report (PAR) since FY 2009.⁴ Without a clear set of goals

¹ See, Council for Court Excellence, *Beyond Second Chances*, Dec. 2016, <http://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/File/BSC-FINAL-web.pdf>.

² *About MOCA*. Retrieved from <https://moca.dc.gov/page/about-moca>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Performance Plans and Reports: Government Operations*. Retrieved from <https://oca.dc.gov/node/160692>.

and strategies, it is hard to know how or whether MOCA leadership is supporting ORCA or prioritizing its success.

We can understand, to some degree, why ORCA was placed in its current cluster. One part of ORCA's mission is advisory – to make policy recommendations to the Mayor about improving reentry– and that role arguably fits within MOCA. However, the most dynamic and resource-intensive half of its mission is to coordinate and monitor service delivery to returning citizens. ORCA staff conducts targeted outreach to returning citizens, performs needs assessments, develops reentry plans, connects returning citizens to services, and provides continued case management to support its clients' long-term reentry success.⁵ This is the work that would be particularly well served in closer collaboration with the PSJ cluster.

ORCA's staff capacity is limited, and during its time in the Community Affairs cluster, its resources have been disproportionately focused on engagement between residents and the Mayor, to the detriment of its obligations to coordinating and monitoring service delivery for returning citizens. For instance, CCE has regularly heard reports from returning citizens over the last four years that they have shown up to ORCA during regular business hours only to find that the office is closed because staff is assisting at a mayoral event unrelated to reentry. In addition to diverting specialized staff who should be focused on reentry-related work, office closures waste returning citizens' limited time and transportation resources and can further damage their trust in government.

ORCA's Twitter account serves as another clear example of the office's outsized focus on community engagement for the Mayor. In December 2019 and January 2020, ORCA's account, @ORCA_DC,

⁵ *MORCA Phase II Strategic Planning Report*. September 2018. Retrieved from https://orca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/orca/page_content/attachments/MORCA%20Strategic%20Plan_0.pdf.

tweeted more than 50 times, but only 11 of those tweets were directly related to the office's work.⁶ The other eighty percent of the tweets announced ribbon cuttings at two new recreation centers, advertised for holiday tree removal, invited constituents to the MLK Day Parade, and promoted the 2020 Census.

Twitter is not the only mode of communication used by ORCA to spread the word about mayoral events. CCE staff has on several occasions received telephone calls from ORCA's Outreach and Services Specialist inviting us to ribbon cuttings at recreations centers and housing complexes on behalf of the Mayor. With limited capacity and an important role, ORCA staff should be laser-focused on mission-specific work, not serving as general support for Community Affairs or other District events. This legislation could change that dynamic and help ensure that ORCA is utilizing its staff and resources most effectively and efficiently to support D.C.'s returning citizens.

Integration of ORCA in Public Safety & Justice Cluster

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice (DMPSJ) "provides direction, guidance support and coordination to the District's public safety agencies to develop and lead interagency public safety initiatives to improve the quality of life in the District's neighborhoods."⁷ DMPSJ oversees the Department of Corrections (which runs the Resources to Empower and Develop You (READY) Center), the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, and the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, all three of which run or fund programming for returning citizens in D.C. This bill would

⁶ Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs [@ORCA_DC]. January 21, 2019. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/ORCA_DC.

⁷ *Cluster Agencies*. Retrieved from <https://dmjsj.dc.gov/page/cluster-agencies>.

add ORCA to this cluster, allowing reentry initiatives to be effectively coordinated and implemented across the PSJ cluster agencies.

In its FY 2019 PAR, DMPSJ lauded adding the Office of Human Rights and the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services to its cluster as one of its top three accomplishments for the year.⁸ It stated that bringing these agencies into the cluster allowed “interagency initiatives and cross-pollination to occur.”⁹ This is precisely the impact that CCE believes will result from adding ORCA to the cluster. The District’s reentry services would benefit greatly from monthly conversations between all of the agency leaders whose work touches this issue. ORCA will also benefit from data sharing and accountability to performance metrics within the PSJ cluster.

Conclusion

Moving OCRA to the PSJ cluster will better equip ORCA to fulfill its mission to support the nearly 2,000 people who return to the District from the Federal Bureau of Prisons each year and the nearly 10,000 people who cycle through the Department of Corrections.¹⁰ CCE endorses this bill and is eager to continue supporting ORCA and all of the District’s efforts to ensure the successful reentry of all D.C.’s returning citizens. Thank you for your time and attention.

⁸ *DMPSJ FY19 PAR*. Retrieved from https://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/publication/attachments/DMPSJ_FY19PAR.pdf.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, *10-Year Estimate of Justice-Involved Individuals in the District of Columbia*. September 2018. Retrieved from <https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/publication/attachments/Ten-Year%20Estimate%20of%20Justice-Involved%20Individuals.pdf>.