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**Statement
of the Council for Court Excellence
before the
Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Agency Performance Oversight Hearing
on the
Office on Returning Citizen Affairs**

**February 14, 2013
10:00 am**

Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the committee. My name is Peter M. Willner. I am a Senior Policy Analyst with the Council for Court Excellence (“CCE”), which is a local nonpartisan civic organization founded in 1982 to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related justice agencies in the District of Columbia. By way of full disclosure, I am also a Commissioner on the Commission on Re-entry. I appear today solely on behalf of CCE. As is our practice, no judicial member of CCE participated in the formulation of this testimony, which concerns the performance of the DC Office on Returning Citizen Affairs.

For 31 years, CCE has been a unique resource that brings together members of the civic, legal, business, and judicial communities to work in common purpose to identify and promote court reforms, improve public access to justice, and increase public understanding and support of our justice system.

Over the past six years we have worked constructively with the Council of the District of Columbia on policy and legislative matters relating to the employment of previously incarcerated persons in DC. For example, in 2006 the CCE Expungement Subcommittee proposed legislation that was largely adopted by the DC Council as the Criminal Record Sealing Act. During 2012, we worked with the Judiciary Committee on and advocated for the enactment of the Reentry Facilitation Amendment Act of 2012, which implements some of the recommendations from CCE's 2011 report, *Unlocking Employment Opportunity for Previously Incarcerated Persons in DC*. We are grateful to the DC Council for enacting this legislation as the provisions of this Act offer incentives to employers who are willing to hire returning citizens but have not done so due to concerns about liability and other reasons.

CCE supports the work of ORCA and commends the impressive work of its small staff. Mr. Thornton and Dr. Brown have done yeoman's work to address ORCA's statutory mission to "coordinate and monitor service delivery to ex-offenders" as well as to "promote the general welfare, empowerment, and reintegration of ex-offenders."

ORCA is an increasingly popular "port of entry" for returning citizens. According to the recent ORCA annual report, between January and December 2012, the Office served almost 5,250 unique individuals, an average of 438 people a month for a budgeted staff of three, which we understand is currently augmented by a temporary fourth staffer who is largely focused on direct employment services. It is worth mentioning that ORCA was serving approximately 300 people a month, as reported in its 2011 annual report. This is about a 46% increase in monthly assistance.

As in 2011, ORCA's 2012 client statistics point to a clear emphasis on employment-related services, likely due to this temporary fourth staffer. ORCA reports that it assisted 2,389

clients with job preparation packages, 1,570 clients with online job applications, and 119 job placements. We suggest that it makes good sense for this fourth staffer to become a full-time employee on OCRA's staff after the position's funding expires.

We are also encouraged by the recent announcement of the new DC Reentry Resource Center. We are unaware of the new Center's operational parameters and details, but we encourage ORCA to not only track client services provided at the Center, but also outcome data, especially any recidivism reductions. It may be worthwhile for ORCA, the Mayor, or the DC Council to consider an evaluation of the Center's effect on recidivism after the Center has established itself.

Supporting expanded capacities for ORCA to address unemployment among returning citizens would seem especially crucial given the estimated 60,000 DC residents with a criminal conviction in DC and the 50% unemployment rate among a sample of returning citizens, as reported in CCE's *Unlocking Employment Opportunity*. This large number of people with a particular but common problem – unemployment due in part to a criminal conviction – requires specialized assistance. Additional staff in this area may also allow the current ORCA leadership to be more focused on their statutory mission related to policy coordination and service delivery monitoring.

CCE is continuing to work on issues relating to employment and criminal records. Currently, we are interested in learning about positive stories concerning employment, both from returning citizens and from the employers that hire them. In late 2013, we hope to publish these stories to address the stigma associated with criminal records, along with an update to our 2011 report. We continue to work with a broad-based committee comprised of members of the CCE Board of Directors, as well as representatives of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the US Parole



Commission, Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, US Attorney's Office for DC, DC Public Defender Service, DC Superior Court, DC Office on Returning Citizen Affairs, DC Department of Employment Services, Alliance of Concerned Men, Visitors' Services Center, and the DC Chamber of Commerce.

This concludes the testimony of the Council for Court Excellence. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have.

