

2022-2023

OFFICERS

CHAIR OF THE BOARD

Marianela Peralta
Aerotek, Inc.

PRESIDENT

Patrick McGlone
Ullico Inc.

IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

Irvin B. Nathan
Arnold & Porter LLP (ret.)

VICE PRESIDENT

James H. Hulme
ArentFox Schiff LLP

SECRETARY

John B. (Jay) Kennedy
The Washington Post

TREASURER &

FINANCE COMMITTEE CHAIR

Julia A. Matthews

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Debra R. Beloff
Jones Day

Joshua B. Bernstein
*Bernstein Management
Company*

Abigail Blomstrom
Monumental Sports

Kevin A. Chambers
U.S. Department of Justice

Paulette E. Chapman
*Koonz, McKenney, Johnson, &
DePaolis LLP*

Eric S. Glover

Paul S. Lee
Steptoe & Johnson LLP

Benjamin J. Razi
Covington & Burling LLP

Elizabeth A. Scully
BakerHostetler

Natalie S. Walker
Webster & Fredrickson, PLLC

Tyrone Walker

Tami Weerasingha-Cote
Children's Law Center

Cynthia G. Wright

Joanne L. Zimolzak
Dykema Gossett PLLC

Lisa B. Zycherman
*Reporters Committee for
Freedom of the Press*

NOMINATING COMMITTEE
CHAIR

Karen E. Evans
The Cochran Firm

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Misty C. Thomas

Judicial leaders not listed.

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

**Budget Oversight Hearing for the
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants**

April 13, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee. My name is Danielle Burs, and I'm testifying in my role as Senior Policy Counsel for the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a mission to enhance justice for all in the District of Columbia. For over 40 years, CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis. (Please note that in accordance with our policy, no judicial member of CCE participated in the formulation or approval of this testimony. This testimony does not reflect the specific views of, or endorsement by, any judicial member of CCE.) Thank you for this opportunity to present our organization's views on the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) FY24 budget.

We want to begin by thanking Mayor Bowser and the Council for the needed infusion of funding to the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants in the FY22 and FY23 budgets, including investments in the District's Access to Justice Initiative. Several witnesses today will go into depth about how those funding increases allowed their organizations to meet more of the need for legal services in our communities. Unfortunately, that need existed before the COVID-19 crisis and continues to exist now that federal COVID funding has

ended. Almost \$20 million in a difficult budget year is a big hole to fill. But in deciding where to invest for FY24, we must not undo the progress of the last two years.

The capable and determined leadership and staff of OVSJG have helped change the lives of thousands of D.C. residents for the better through funding direct services for victims in crisis, continuing to support community-based reentry service providers either through direct funding or through the Reentry Action Network (RAN), or funding resources to make District residents aware of the services and options available to them. Two critical and recent CCE projects supported by OVSJG – the D.C. Reentry Action Network (RAN) Support Services, Training, and Education and the D.C. Correctional Facility Stakeholder Engagement continue to help guide work in those areas well beyond when they were funded. And we know that our partners in direct legal services have worked hard to make the most of their OVSJG support as well.

According to the Access to Justice Commission, more than 80% of litigants in housing, domestic violence, family, and public benefits cases are not represented by counsel.¹ As many as 97% of D.C. residents engaged in probate matters, a particularly complicated area of the law, are unrepresented.² We know that outcomes in all of these areas are greatly improved when individuals have counsel. For example, legal assistance in 2022 eviction cases from Access to Justice Initiative grantees led to 82% of tenants retaining possession of their unit.³ The last two years allowed for longstanding, trusted organizations to step up and assist more of our neighbors. In some areas, the need will now be greater. The D.C. Council unanimously passed a new debt-collection law which affords greater rights to consumers.⁴ Legal services providers have already

¹ “Accessing Justice in D.C.: The Need.” The District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission. Accessed 4/13/2023. <<https://dcaccesstojustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ATJ-Community-Need.pdf>>

² Ibid.

³ “Accessing Justice in D.C.: The Initiative’s Impact.” The District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission. Accessed 4/13/2023. <<https://dcaccesstojustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Initiatives-Impact.pdf>>

⁴ D.C. Law 24-154

seen a 35% increase in requests for legal help in this area over the past year⁵ – a measurable increase in their work that is necessary to support new legislation. Unfortunately, a 60% decrease in funding is heading in the wrong direction.

CCE appreciates its ongoing relationship with and support from OVSJG. Staying true to its mission of working to enhance the District’s justice system to serve the public equitably, CCE urges the Council to fill the gap in funding for FY24. Thank you for your attention today; we are happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁵ “Accessing Justice in D.C.: The Need.” The District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission. Accessed 4/13/2023. <<https://dcaccesstojustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ATJ-Community-Need.pdf>>