



COUNCIL FOR COURT EXCELLENCE

**Statement of
Priscilla Skillman, Assistant Director
of the Council for Court Excellence
before the
DC Council Committee on Human Services
Concerning the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2011 Budget for the
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

April 19, 2010

Good afternoon, Chairman Wells 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 28 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. I last testified for CCE on juvenile justice issues before this committee in February 2010 at your oversight hearing about DYRS performance. As is our policy, no judicial member of the Council for Court Excellence board of directors participated in preparing this statement.

Since our February testimony, the Mayor has proposed his fiscal year 2011 budget for DYRS, and the city has recently experienced a frightening and senseless incident of gun violence that left four youths dead and others injured, allegedly at the hands of teenagers and young adults well-known to the District's justice system.

It is important for all the agencies involved in the DC juvenile and adult justice systems to examine their decisions and actions related to any person known to those systems who was a victim or who has been charged in the March 30 South Capitol Street shootings, to learn lessons that might prevent a similar tragedy in the future. It is also important for the DC Council to provide careful oversight of that review process to learn if any legislative changes are warranted.

Without minimizing the horror of the March 30 tragedy, the Council for Court Excellence continues to support the statutory mandate of the District's juvenile justice system: 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.



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We continue to support the recent reforms of the District's juvenile justice system which aim to conform the system to that statutory mandate. It goes without saying that the safety of youth and the community requires very close supervision of delinquent youth who are in the community rather than confined in an institution. If there were failures of case management surrounding the March 30 incident, our support of system reform in general does not excuse those mistakes. It is essential to correct systemic weaknesses or performance breakdowns promptly, or community and political support of the reform effort could end.

But all national research studies confirm that 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.

Our original review of the Mayor's proposed budget for DYRS left us with a number of questions and concerns – the budget tables do not clearly display how various functions have been shifted from one part of the agency to another. We thank DYRS Interim Director Marc Schindler for correcting some of our misperceptions as we prepared our testimony, but we believe it should not be so difficult for the public to understand the Mayor's budget document.

We urge this committee to ask for assurance that the budget proposed for DYRS is sufficient to its mission and its Agency Performance Plan with regard to the following:

- The proposed 2011 budget eliminates 4 FTEs from serving youth who are court-ordered to be detained before trial in community settings rather than in the secure Youth Services Center. Is the agency confident that they can maintain quality in their supervision of shelter home placements with this reduction?
- The DYRS Agency Performance Plan pledges to increase the percentage of newly committed youth who undergo a complete case-planning process and then receive services consistent with their plans from 2009's rate of only 69% to a rate of 95% in fiscal 2011. Rigorous case planning and case management are essential if we expect the juvenile justice system to protect us and to produce good outcomes for youth and the community. Is the proposed funding and staffing sufficient to improve DYRS case planning and case management as dramatically as the Performance Plan expects?



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- The number of juveniles committed by Family Court judges to DYRS has been rising each year, despite flat juvenile crime levels in the city. 39 FTEs were previously assigned to “Committed Youth Services,” but this year only 24 FTEs continue that function (while being moved to “Resource Management and Utilization”), 8 FTEs have been eliminated, and 7 FTEs have been shifted to other functions. Is the proposed funding and staffing sufficient to accommodate the current high levels of commitments?
- DYRS’s operations have been organized to conform 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. The vast majority of committed youth are case-managed by DYRS in contracted community-based settings, not in DYRS-owned and operated locked facilities. Is the proposed funding and staffing sufficient to provide high-quality community supervision services that ensure safety for the youth and the community?
- Finally, the agency projects that 25% of all committed youth will be sent to out-of-state placements this year and 20% in fiscal 2011. This percentage of out-of-state residential placements for committed youth greatly exceeds the percentage of committed youth who are held at the District’s secure facility, New Beginnings. We believe that DYRS’s being unable to accommodate such a large percentage of committed youth locally is a problem that needs immediate attention by this committee and the District government, to plan and budget for an appropriate solution to ensure that the District has adequate capacity to accommodate youth who need residential treatment or secure confinement.

We thank you for the opportunity to testify.