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

Budget Oversight Hearing for the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs

March 28, 2019

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman White and members of the committee. My name is Ted Whitehouse and I am here today in my capacity as the chair of the Council for Court Excellence's (CCE) Re-entry Subcommittee. I am also Senior Counsel at the firm of Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP. Emily Tatro, Deputy Director for CCE, accompanies me. 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. Per our policy, no judicial members of the CCE Board of Directors participated in the preparation of today's testimony.

Today, we are here today to commend the investments made in the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA) and offer recommendations regarding the proposed Fiscal Year 2020 budget.

ID Fee Waivers and Transportation Stipends

As you well know, the Returning Citizen Opportunity to Succeed Amendment Act of 2017 passed last year with pilot funding in FY19 of \$60,000 each for 1) identity document fee waivers and 2) SmarTrip card Metro stipends, both initiatives recommended in CCE's 2015 [Beyond Second Chances](#) reentry report. People in the District who are within one year of release from a Federal

Bureau of Prisons facility are eligible for both services. These services are arguably small, in terms of budget scale and seeming significance, but their impact in the daily lives of our returning citizen neighbors and loved ones is actually quite large.

Unfortunately, no funding was included for either program in Mayor Bowser's proposed FY20 budget.

Since November 1, 2018, nearly 300 returning citizens have received fee waivers for driver's licenses and non-driver identifications or birth certificate waivers from MORCA. If this initial rate of need continues, MORCA will serve approximate 720 returning citizens per year with this program. Even assuming that each of these people comes to MORCA seeking a driver's license waiver (the most expensive of the three), this program is projected to cost \$33,840 in its first year. Currently, a D.C. driver's license costs \$47, non-driver's ID costs \$20, and a birth certificate costs \$23.

Additionally, in just over a month, from February 22 to March 26, 2019, 151 people have benefitted from the transportation stipend program. Participants receive SmarTrip cards worth \$90 each month, for three months. This modest benefit helps them get to all the places they need to go while building a successful reentry plan during those first few tenuous months home: the DMV, job interviews, doctors' appointments, meetings with Community Supervision Officers, peer support groups, community-based reentry service organizations, and more. The \$60,000 initially invested in transportation stipends in the last budget will only serve 222 returning citizens, and MORCA appears to be on track to run out of funds in less than two months. Fully funding this program at this rate would cost nearly half a million dollars, and while that may not be possible in the FY20 budget, we can certainly make strides toward this goal.

These programs are vital to the well-being and success of returning citizens. CCE hopes to see these programs return in FY20 with levels of funding adjusted for projected need. We recommend adding \$35,000 to the budget for identity document fee waivers and at least \$100,000 for transportation stipends to the FY20 budget so that MORCA can continue to assist returning citizens in accessing the basic identification and transportation necessary to their success. We cannot and should not reasonably expect people to succeed in rejoining the workforce, to comply with their many expectations, and to reestablish themselves in our community quickly if we do not support them in these most basic ways.

Hiring an Additional Case Manager

Beyond those programs specifically, we are happy that the District has made important investments in MORCA over the past several years. In FY17, the Council approved a \$449,000 budget for MORCA, which has essentially doubled over three years to \$894,000 in this FY20 proposal. Three full-time employee positions have been added over that time, and this year's budget will allow for a fourth, a case manager focused on serving people returning from the Federal Bureau of Prisons. This is unprecedented progress, and CCE applauds the focus of Mayor Bowser, the D.C. Council, especially you Chairman White, and the dedicated staff at MORCA to make sure that this office is improving its services for several thousand returning citizens every day.

MORCA sees approximately 2,000 returning citizens each year, and now has a greater capacity to conduct holistic assessments of its returning citizen clients, collaborate to create reentry plans, and follow up on referrals made, all crucial components of MORCA's recently released strategic plan. CCE commends the addition of a new FTE in the proposed FY20 budget

and hopes to see additional staff added over the next four years until the organizational chart proposed in MORCA's new strategic plan is fulfilled.

Release of Strategic Plan

CCE is pleased that MORCA's [Phase II Strategic Planning Report](#) has been made public as we requested at last month's oversight hearing. We are excited about the office's new streamlined mission and vision, and we – as well as many other community partners – are eager to help MORCA move toward achieving its programmatic and administrative goals. A few goals of particular note include: formalizing a follow-up protocol for client referrals; implementing the OVSJG-integrated and widely-used Efforts to Outcomes software to keep data on clients; continuing partnerships to waive fees for identity documents; devising a strategy for collaboration with the Department of Corrections' READY Center; meeting its commitments to share information and evaluate programs; and moving MORCA from the Community Affairs cluster back into Public Safety and Justice.

Conclusion

The allocation of additional funds allows MORCA to grow as an agency and continue to create meaningful change in the lives of D.C.'s returning citizens. In addition to being able to hire a new case manager, we hope to see continued support for the transportation and documentation fee waiver programs from the D.C. Council. Thank you, Chairman White for your time. We appreciate your ongoing commitment to making D.C. a safer and fairer community for everyone and are happy to answer any questions you may have.