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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

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

February 21, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Robert 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's) Re-entry Subcommittee. I am also Senior Counsel to the firm of Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP. Emily Tatro, CCE's Deputy Director, 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 DC. As is our practice, no judicial members of the CCE Board of Directors participated in the formulation of this testimony.

Introduction

We are here today to celebrate the recent investments in MORCA and the returning citizens it serves, discuss the implementation of new identification fee waiver and transportation stipend programs, and request the immediate release of MORCA's strategic planning documents.

Implementation of ID Fee Waivers and Transportation Stipends

The Returning Citizen Opportunity to Succeed Amendment Act of 2017 passed last summer, with FY20 funding of \$60,000 for identification document fee

waivers and \$60,000 for SmarTrip stipends, both dedicated for people within one year of their release from a Federal Bureau of Prisons facility. Since November 1, MORCA has distributed 100 fee waivers for driver's licenses or non-driver's identifications and 77 birth certificate waivers. The transportation stipend program has not yet kicked off and will be operated in conjunction with the Dept. of Employment Services (DOES), but MORCA has so far identified 90 returning citizens eligible for participation. CCE hopes to see the SmarTrip stipend program moving forward quickly so that some evaluation of this pilot program can be done before finalizing next year's budget.

The Dept. of Corrections' (DOC) READY Center officially opened last week, and we also hope to see direct access to both of these waiver programs at the READY Center. Eligible participants, those being released from Bureau of Prisons custody through the DOC, should not have to make three stops, at the READY Center, MORCA, and DOES, before getting any assistance with Metro fare.

Strategic Plan Publication and Implementation

CCE was proud to partner with MORCA, Lachman Consulting, and the Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants to complete Phase I of MORCA's strategic planning process in September 2017, gathering information to develop findings and recommendations about MORCA's current state and desired direction. Phase II was intended to use that information to set goals and priorities, and build MORCA's capacity to achieve them.

CCE is disappointed that, despite Phase II's completion in September 2018, no information about MORCA's strategic plan has been publicly released. Strategic planning was designed to help MORCA map out a path to achieve its mission of becoming DC's re-entry hub. MORCA has struggled with defining its unique role in re-entry among plethora of federal and local agencies, nonprofit service providers, and now the READY Center. The office needs a clear vision to define its role and a detailed strategy to achieve its goals. This will become even more crucial as the office's current director, Brian Ferguson, takes leave from his role in September, so CCE requests the immediate public release of these strategic planning documents.

CCE stands by the recommendation in our *Beyond Second Chances* report that MORCA work toward fulfilling its statutory mission through four priorities: 1) doing affirmative outreach into BOP prisons, halfway houses, and DOC facilities – including both CDF and CTF – to provide information that will help people prepare for their release; 2) conducting needs assessments at MORCA to help people create individualized transition plans; 3) providing targeted referrals and connections to service providers to address each returning citizen's needs; and 4) collecting data that they are uniquely positioned to gather to assist DC in making smart reentry policy decisions moving forward. For instance, MORCA is well situated to track who is returning to DC, when, and from where; what peoples' needs are upon arriving home, and how those needs are or are not being met; and using this information to identify and fortify successful paths of reentry for the next people returning home.

Conclusion

CCE is eager for MORCA to share its Phase II strategic planning and is thrilled to see the progress that has been made in the implementation of services. We hope to learn more very soon about the direction of this office in the months to come. If we care about crime and public safety in the District, we must care about recidivism, and if we care about recidivism, we must, at root, care about our returning citizens. If we want to break cycles and enhance community reintegration, we must support missions like MORCA's and the dedicated people and organizations working with our returning citizens in DC. CCE looks forward to working with Director Ferguson, Mayor Bowser, and the DC Council to continue to improve the District's reentry system. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We are happy to answer any questions that you may have.