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

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

April 4, 2019

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Allen 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) Reentry Subcommittee. I am also Senior Counsel at the firm of Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP. Casey Anderson, Policy Analyst and Development Manager 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.

We want to begin by thanking Mayor Bowser for the \$500,000 in local dollars she added to the proposed FY20 budget for the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants for community-based reentry services. However, we must note that the \$200,000 increase previously added by Council in FY19 for these same services was removed from OVSJG's proposed FY20 budget, resulting in a net increase of \$300,000 for FY20. CCE is thankful for the increase in funding for OVSJG and its important work, and our testimony today urges the Council to go further in increasing appropriations of local dollar funding for community-based reentry services.

CCE joins the D.C. Reentry Action Network in asking that an additional \$800,000 in local dollars be allocated to OVSJG for community-based reentry services, for a total of \$2.74 million in local dollar funding. This level of funding is critical for community-based providers not only to

continue to provide high-quality services to returning citizens, but also to increase the number of returning citizens served.

Additionally, CCE encourages the Council to again appropriate funds to OVSJG specifically to provide for continued community engagement around whether and how to plan for and build a new correctional facility in the District. This is an issue that has captured much of our community's attention and concern, and deserves meaningful District engagement to ensure all perspectives and best practices are heard and considered.

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 RAN, and funding resources to make District residents aware of the services and options available to them. Today we will tell you about two CCE projects supported by OVSJG, the D.C. Reentry Action Network (RAN) Support Services, Training, and Education project and the D.C. Correctional Facility Stakeholder Engagement project – that are but two examples of why robust and adequate funding for OVSJG is critical in the District of Columbia.

D.C. Reentry Action Network

As members of this committee know, RAN is a coalition of community-based reentry service providers in the District. RAN member organizations provide crucial services to people returning home from incarceration in the D.C. Jail or the Bureau of Prisons, with services including employment, housing, education, and healthcare. RAN Co-Chair Paula Thompson will provide additional information about the coalition in her testimony today. For the past two years, CCE has received funding from OVSJG to administer and provide technical support to RAN. Increased funding in FY19 has allowed RAN to host, for the first time, a comprehensive communications training for RAN member organizations and their returning citizen clients who seek to be empowered advocates for their own policy positions and to share their own stories with the public. Additionally, meaningful OVSJG

funding ensured that RAN could begin working on a website for RAN, and apply for – and be awarded – the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) “How Being Trauma-Informed Improves Criminal Justice System Responses” Train-the-Trainer Event in 2019. This training will be offered to RAN member organizations and to representatives government agencies, including the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) and D.C. Superior Court, and is one more step toward operating a trauma-informed justice system in D.C.

Funding from OVSJG has been vital in helping RAN members gain access to opportunities that help them better advocate for their impactful organizations and more effectively serve their returning citizen clients. Through our collaboration with RAN, CCE sees firsthand the critical work that community-based reentry service providers are doing in the District, and shows us how much more is possible with continued commitments, leadership, and assistance from OVSJG. As you have heard or will hear today, OVSJG’s support of RAN’s member organizations has allowed them to expand or increase services, develop new programs, increase public safety, and improve the lives of not only the District’s returning citizens but the communities in which they live. These groups are assets to this city, serving a special population of people, and whose impacts can grow exponentially with even modest increases in the District’s investments in their efforts.

District Task Force on Jails & Justice

In January, CCE received FY19 funding from OVSJG to focus on best practices and articulating a community vision for a new correctional facility. CCE is partnering with the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens to complete this work. To accomplish this goal, CCE and its partners plan to do significant community outreach, engagement, and listening across the District to learn about our residents’ priorities for corrections, rehabilitation, and public safety. To synthesize the community information collected and to leverage expert perspectives and data, we are convening the District Task Force on Jails & Justice, a blue ribbon task force of D.C.’s justice

stakeholders, including government leaders, judges, research and policy experts, community leaders who are directly impacted by incarceration, and leaders who work to serve people who are incarcerated or returning from incarceration.

This Task Force represents a significant step forward in determining the priorities of the community around whether and how to build a new correctional facility in D.C. and ensuring that any new facility would best fit the health and safety needs of all who will interact with the jail. Ultimately, it is clear that the District, through OVSJG-funded support, wants to help building the future of corrections in the District that allows our city to emerge a stronger national leader in best practices in promoting rehabilitation while serving the needs of those incarcerated in the facility, employees of the jail, and the broader D.C. community. The FY19 funding to begin community engagement and establish the District Task Force on Jails & Justice is an important step forward in achieving these goals, but continued funding and support is needed to make them a reality.

Conclusion

The diverse work supported by OVSJG is invaluable and brings a vital trauma-informed, community-based lens to how the District can enhance justice. However, to ensure adequate support of a critical part of OVSJG's work, we strongly urge the Council to increase funding for community-based reentry service providers, and to allocate additional, separate funds to continue community and expert planning for the next chapter of correctional innovation. The requests made are only a small portion of the overall budget but could change the lives of thousands of incarcerated people and returning citizens in the District who are among D.C.'s most vulnerable and forgotten residents. Thank you for your attention today; we are happy to answer any questions you may have.