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

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

February 27, 2020

Good morning, Chairman Allen and members of the committee. My name is Misty Thomas and I am the Executive Director for the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with the mission to enhance justice in the District of Columbia. Over the past 38 years CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis, facilitating collaboration and convening diverse stakeholders, and creating educational resources for the public. Per our policy, no judicial member of CCE participated in the preparation of today's testimony.

Today, I am happy to testify about the invaluable role the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) plays in the District. We will also provide an update on the two current CCE projects funded by OVSJG – first, technical support to the D.C. Reentry Action Network and the Correctional Facility Community Engagement project – and the ways in which these initiatives empowering returning citizens, advocates, justice stakeholders and practitioners, reentry service providers and other local residents to make their voice heard and build a better justice system in the District.

OVSJG has been an invaluable partner to CCE, helping us work towards our shared vision to create a more equitable justice system in D.C. Under Director Michelle Garcia's capable leadership, and with the support of her experienced and dedicated staff, OVSJG does far more than simply serve as a funder and grant administrator. OVSJG provides vital educational and capacity-building support to grantees, establishes priorities for collective effort, brings stakeholders together for dialogue, and consistently offers innovative ways to improve the work they support.

D.C. Reentry Action Network

OVSJG has been a crucial contributor to our administration of the D.C. Reentry Action Network (RAN) and provision of technical assistance to its members over the last three years. RAN is a coalition of more than twenty nonprofit organizations that provide direct reentry services to justice-involved D.C. residents with the goal of promoting successful reintegration. The coalition provides an ongoing opportunity for its members to exchange information, address issues of mutual concern, discuss obstacles faced by their clients, strengthen services, and speak with a collective voice for reentry in the District. CCE supports RAN by coordinating meetings and crafting agendas, facilitating strategic planning sessions, collaborating on the development of annual priorities, securing

training opportunities, developing a communication strategy, and drafting educational and public materials for and about RAN.

RAN's work is particularly critical in the District. In our community, approximately one in 22 adults are under correctional control on any given day.¹ As this committee well knows, for many individuals who are returning home from incarceration or who are dealing with the collateral consequences of convictions, it can sometimes be difficult to navigate the system of resources available. Upon reentry, returning citizens face enormous challenges including a severe lack of affordable housing,² limited employment opportunities,³ as well as diminished access to mental and physical healthcare,⁴ and myriad other issues. Through RAN, reentry service providers collaborate to cultivate both long and short-term solutions to these issues and tailor their services to better support returning citizens in this challenging environment.

As RAN continues to grow – both in terms of membership and achievements – the coalition is increasingly looked at as a leader in reentry in the District. OVSJG's support has allowed CCE to provide consistent back-end support to RAN as it has become an integral voice on the still-developing halfway house situation in the D.C. This year, RAN has communicated with the relevant stakeholders, gathered information from its members and other organizations, and released a strong statement calling for a halfway house in D.C. and encouraging action from the Bureau of Prisons. Additionally, OVSJG's support has created two paid internship opportunities for returning citizens in the last year. These opportunities not only expand the capacity of RAN, but it allows those individuals to build their professional resumes and contacts, hopefully making future employment easier to access. Finally, RAN was able to vote in four new members to the coalition, and have its second set of officer elections in the last year. RAN has a vibrant group of leaders who are truly dedicated to seeing the coalition succeed and make an impact. These opportunities and coalition growth would not have been possible without OVSJG's support of RAN, CCE, and frequently the individual member organizations that are part of the coalition.

Not only does OVSJG facilitate the funding needed to support to this vital network, but it stands as an active partner. OVSJG has worked with CCE and RAN leadership collaboratively to address barriers to participation, to enhance transparency of the coalition's work, and to get more organizations aware of and interested in RAN's work. Because of OVSJG, RAN is flourishing and growing, which directly contributes to the success of returning citizens of the District and, ultimately, our community at large.

D.C. Correctional Facility Community Engagement

It is not a surprise to anyone on this committee that there is widespread agreement that DC's Central Detention Facility, which opened 44 years ago, must be closed. Beyond the facility's structural and safety issues, CCE believes that planning for the future of incarceration in D.C. cannot stop at a building.

¹ U.S. Census data shows that out of approximately 504,242 adults in the District of Columbia in 2015, roughly 22,999 people were under correctional control on a given day (excluding average daily arrests).

² Elkins, K. (2016). The 11 most expensive cities in America. *Business Insider*.

³ Rothwell, J. (2012). *Education, job opening, and unemployment in metropolitan America*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

⁴ Council for Court Excellence. (2016). *Beyond Second Chances*.

Rather, it must include meaningful consideration of how a jail should – and should not – be used; what public safety goals are – and are not – achieved through incarceration; and the appropriate scale and services needed for our community. This requires an understanding of the public health and safety needs of the District, and a holistic focus on how any facility fits into the city leaders’ and residents’ priorities to make our community safer and healthier for all.

CCE first received FY2019 funding from OVSJG to focus on articulating the best practices and our community’s vision for a new correctional facility. To do this work most effectively, CCE and OVSJG worked together to establish a Task Force on Jails & Justice. The Task Force includes interdisciplinary leaders from across D.C. and individuals with lived experiences in the justice system. With an OVSJG grant, CCE was able to coordinate the Task Force, support its research and outreach efforts, and draft its preliminary findings. That Phase I report, *Jails & Justice: A Framework for Change* was released in November 2019 and reflects a culmination of nine months of deep community engagement, correctional data analysis, research into best practices, and deliberation by Task Force Members. The report incorporates the opinions of nearly 2,000 community members shared through focus groups, community workshops, a town hall, and a survey. It also makes 17 high-level recommendations for progress, pointing to an increasing demand for alternatives to the overreliance on the criminal justice system.

With FY2020 funding from OVSJG, CCE, along with our partners The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens and the Vera Institute of Justice, have begun Phase II of this vital initiative to re-imagine major parts of D.C.’s justice system and evaluate how incarceration fits into that new picture. In Phase II the Task Force is diving into its Phase I priorities, continuing to engage District residents and relevant experts, and ultimately developing a detailed “implementation plan” for the District to use as it decides to fund or build any new facility or make other changes to the criminal legal system. CCE is grateful to OVSJG for the continued support on this project, which has the capacity to impact the District for many years to come.

Like with the RAN work, and our prior collaborative efforts on CCE’s *Victims Guide to the D.C. Justice System*, OVSJG staff has also been substantively helpful with the Task Force. They have lent their time to participating in committee meetings, offering editorial support, and connecting CCE to relevant stakeholders in the victim’s rights communities and others. Their engagement makes our work better – and, we believe, ultimately makes the District better.

Conclusion

CCE would like to extend our gratitude to OVSJG for their continued support and partnership in tackling these difficult issues. The team at OVSJG is easy to work with, responsive, and clearly passionate about their mission. The work that has resulted from their funding is crucial and effective, and we greatly value their guidance in how we can continue to create a more equitable and just system. This concludes my testimony, and I welcome any questions you may have.