



February 27, 2020

**Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
Performance Oversight Hearing:  
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Testimony of Paula Thompson  
Co-Chair, DC Reentry Action Network  
February 27, 2020**

Good Morning Chairman Allen and fellow members of the Committee. My name is Paula Thompson and I am the Executive Director of Voices for a Second Chance, an OVSJG grantee whose mission it is to empower those currently and recently incarcerated. I am also the proud Co-Chair of the DC Reentry Action Network (DC RAN), along with my Co-Chair Chiquisha Robinson. I am here today to represent the 25 nonprofit members of RAN. RAN is a coalition of nonprofit organizations that provide direct reentry-specific services to justice-involved DC residents. Voices for a Second Chance helps to create stronger relationships between those incarcerated and their families and communities, as well as providing counseling and support while incarcerated to address challenges. In doing so, those who participate are better prepared to successfully transition back into the community and build better futures for themselves and their loved ones.

Michelle Garcia, Director of OVSJG, has been a source of great support to RAN since its inception in 2016. Michelle and her strong team have helped provide technical assistance and administrative supports to support RAN in building a community of reentry service providers for collective voice and impact. The growth of RAN has allowed reentry providers to unite in this type of coalition for the first time, and we are excited to continue creating change together.

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Additionally, RAN is grateful that OVSJG has also granted continued funding for administrative support for RAN to the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). With OVSJG's funding and CCE's partnership, RAN added four new members in FY19, became a key voice in the conversation around a new halfway house in the District, and organized two training opportunities. In March 2019, RAN held a first-of-its-kind comprehensive communications training where RAN members and their returning citizen clients were given the tools to use their personal experience and storytelling techniques to educate public officials and the general public about the challenges and successes of DC's returning citizens. Then in June 2019, RAN was awarded a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Trauma-Informed Care for Justice-Involved People Train-the-Trainer event.

OVSJG also provided funds in FY20, which will be used towards professional development by members of RAN and programs to empower the returning citizens they serve. This includes increasing communication and collaboration with reentry service providers and other justice stakeholders. Increased collaboration will allow for additional information sharing, better continuum of care, and improving systems to better serve and support our returning citizen neighbors. This continued funding allows RAN members and their clients to continue having access to professional development opportunities, host trainings for their returning citizen clients so they better understand their rights, and thus improve the District's reentry landscape for neighbors returning home from incarceration.

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RAN connects effective, local, client-centered reentry service providers to exchange knowledge, strengthen services and give voice to a historically underserved population in our city—people with criminal records in the District. For 2020, RAN has determined the priorities for returning citizens in our city to be ensuring returning citizens have rehabilitative and safe halfway houses in the District to come home to, coordination of care, safe and affordable housing opportunities for meaningful employment, and access to substance use disorder treatment. Thanks to OVSJG's ongoing support, RAN has become a collective voice of reentry service providers to communicate the needs of returning citizens and work closely with city agencies and DC Council to identify service gaps.

While RAN is grateful for OVSJG's continued funding of our work, the need is great. The RAN members work hard every day to provide quality services but the need is so much greater than what the 14 RAN members funded through OVSJG can provide. But with 1,500 to 2,000 DC code offenders returning to DC every year from Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) facilities alone and nearly 12,000 being released from the Department of Corrections (DOC)<sup>1</sup>, more funding is needed. That is why RAN is recommending that OVSJG implement a new grant making strategy that raises the currently stipulated funding cap to OVSJG grantees from \$125,000 to \$200,000. Modestly increasing the current funding cap is critical to provide organizations the necessary resources to create and fully implement robust, consistent and effective programming for

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<sup>1</sup> Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. (2015). *One-Day Count of Justice System Involved Individuals within the District of Columbia*.

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returning citizens. This increase will give grantees the ability to expand effective programming which will yield a high return on investment by promoting successful re-integration, lowering recidivism rates, creating jobs, increasing income and improving outcomes overall. The current rate of funding generally only allows for one staff person in addition to some program support. Raising the cap that can be requested for each grant would allow many OVSJG funded RAN members to increase staffing and serve more returning citizens, expand programming to more areas of the city, increase class sizes, and/or add important elements to current programming.

In addition, it is difficult for RAN clients to fully participate in – and benefit from – robust, effective programming while also experiencing housing instability or homelessness. Fifty percent of OVSJG grantee clients are without safe, stable housing when they enter jail and prison. Grantees that serve especially vulnerable populations, such as returning citizens with serious mental illness, report homelessness rates as high as 95 percent. And they are exiting the criminal legal system the same way they entered it – homeless and lacking the basic supports to help sustain them in our community. That is why RAN is asking OVSJG to fund a pilot project to provide housing and supportive services to 50 returning citizens over a period of 3 years. RAN estimates that the housing pilot project would cost approximately \$1.8 million dollars annually to operate. The total cost for a three year pilot would be about \$5.5 million dollars. The pilot project would allow 50 men who have recently returned from incarceration or who are preparing for release to access rent support, security deposits, furniture and other essentials. Additionally, it would provide recovery-oriented case management services to ensure these individuals have the support required to manage their apartments, fulfill their supervision and other obligations and

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live their fullest lives. With OVSJG's continued, and increased support, we can make a greater impact on the lives of our returning citizen neighbors in the District. We believe it is important to focus on men, as they make up over 90 percent of DC residents involved in the criminal legal system. Next year, we will propose a similar but smaller housing pilot for women that will address their unique needs.

I would like to thank you, Chairman Allen, and the Judiciary Committee for prioritizing reentry work and for recognizing the vital importance of OVSJG. The needs are immense. In this city, one in twenty-two adults are under some form of correctional control and one in seven adults have a criminal record. However, as RAN continues to grow and advocate for our returning citizen neighbors, I remain hopeful that one day their needs will be fully met.

The FY20 grantees participating in RAN include Collaborative Solutions for Communities; Community Connections, Inc; Community Family Life Services; Community Mediation DC, Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop; Hillcrest Children and Family Center; House of Ruth; Jubilee Housing; Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia; Open City Advocates, National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, Thrive DC, University Legal Services, and Voices for a Second Chance.

Though I have mentioned what could be possible by increasing the funding cap to OVSJG grantees and creating a housing pilot to serve 50 men who are returning citizens, I would like to

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share some real success stories that the OVSJG funds have enabled. The impact on the lives of returning citizens has been tremendous.

Mr. Jones came to the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens (NRNRC) after doing 23 years in prison. He was released in 2019 from the Federal Bureau of Prisons and was introduced to NRNRC through their Ready4Work Cohort in October of 2019, with a desire to be gainfully employed. While participating in the program, he got involved with outreach campaigns and volunteer service in the community. Mr. Jones received job coaching, mentoring and job placement assistance from the organization, which gave him the confidence to testify in front of the DC Council for new legislation impacting other returning citizens. Upon completion of the Ready4Work cohort, he secured an interview and was eventually hired permanently as a delivery driver for YerbaMates in December. He stated that the NRNRC has “helped me realize determination brings results. There are individuals that care and will help you help yourself. Put the work in and see the result, which is progress.”

Soon after his release from prison two years ago, Mr. NM contacted Voices for a Second Chance (VSC). Like most justice-involved individuals, Mr. NM needed a birth certificate, identification and his social security card. He also needed support services such as food, clothing and transportation. During his first visit to VSC, Mr. NM was able to obtain a check to receive his birth certificate and a referral for his identification. He also received clothing, food, transportation, and an appointment within seven days to return to begin case management services.

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During the case management intake Mr. NM disclosed he was homeless, an unemployed skilled laborer with a substance use disorder and gave our case manager a slip of paper with the word HIV + written on it. The case manager immediately contacted a partnering organization to schedule a medical appointment to facilitate his prescriptions. She also completed the combined Medicaid/SNAP application to ensure he had access to insurance coverage and food for nutritional support. She then contacted a medically supported housing agency and was able to facilitate his housing within 30 days of contact by providing the psychosocial assessment and police clearance. This housing facility provided Mr. NM with nutritional support, substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling. The VSC case manager worked in concert with the housing provider and assisted NM with his employment search.

Today, Mr. NM is gainfully employed, has independent housing, and has paid fair market rent for nearly 2 years. His home is fully furnished. He has his driver's license and has purchased a car. With the assistance of his sponsor, he celebrates over 2 years of sobriety. He has successfully reunited with his children and family. Mr. NM continues to participate in supportive case management.

Daisy came to Thrive DC's Women in New Directions program (WIND) after having been released from BOP with a 10-year sentence. Daisy came to Thrive DC from a halfway house, she walked slumped over and avoided all eye contact. Daisy was very distrusting, under confident and was incredibly hard on herself. The only thing she was sure of was that she did not want to

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return to prison. She chose WIND's Customer Service track. After eight weeks she was prepared to take her customer service certification. Daisy was very nervous about the test and kept saying, "I have never passed a test in my life" and "I know I will not pass this test." Everyone in the office encouraged Daisy and tried to build her confidence. Test day came and Daisy sat for her test. She was so nervous she was close to tears. But, she persevered and completed the exam. The WIND program awaited her score with bated breath. They had all become very invested in Daisy's success. Finally, the scores were in and she passed! There was an office-wide cheer and Daisy was reduced to tears of joy. She sobbed, "This is the first time I have EVER passed anything. I did not think I could do it, but I did it." They were all in tears and so happy to witness Daisy's moment of triumph. She cried and laughed and eventually walked out of the office so much more confident, ebullient, and even taller than when she'd arrived. She looked Thrive DC Executive Director Alicia Horton in the eye for the first time in two months and said, "Thank you." What she did not know was that the pleasure was all Alicia's. They had watched her grow and then witnessed her realize her own potential. It was something to see! Daisy is employed now with a full-time job, making a living wage. She is out of custody and living in transitional housing. Daisy is on her way and Thrive DC is so proud to have been a part of her journey to success.

We, as a city, need to recognize that in order to stop the cycle of violence and the creation of new victims, we must fully fund high-quality reentry services and help returning citizens find stable, affordable housing. By addressing the needs of returning citizens, we can prevent them from re-offending; we know firsthand from our years of experience at our nonprofits that good,



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accessible re-entry work reduces crime. Comprehensive reentry services are an effective means to improving public safety for all of our citizens in the nation's capital. By working with returning citizens, we can reduce costs in policing, corrections, probation, and courts and most importantly, we can rebuild lives.

I look forward to continuing the conversation on reentry, and am available to answer any questions you may have. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

DC Reentry Action Network

Co-chair – Paula Thompson – Voices for a Second Chance

Co-chair – Chiquisha Robinson

Policy Committee Chairs – Tammy Seltzer – ULS-DRDC & Alicia Horton – Thrive DC

Community Engagement Committee Chair – Courtney Stewart – National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens

Program Committee Chair – Katherine Sponaule – Community Family Life Services

Membership and Governance Committee Chair – Caroline Cragin – Community Mediation DC

Returning Citizen Representative – Kevin Petty – Amazing Gospel Souls, INC

Amazing Gospel Souls, INC

Building Futures Program Community Services Agency

Changing Perception

Collaborative Solutions for Communities

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Community Connections, Inc.  
Community Family Life Services  
Community Mediation DC  
Criminon New Life DC  
DC Project Connect  
DC Reentry Task Force  
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop  
Hillcrest Children and Family Center  
House of Ruth  
Jubilee Housing  
Legal Aid DC  
Lorton Art Program  
National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens  
Open City Advocates  
Project New Opportunity  
SOME, Inc.  
Southeast Ministries  
The Rock Christian Church Ministries  
Thrive DC  
ULS – Disability Rights DC  
United Planning Organization  
Voices for a Second Chance