GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

OFFICE ON AGING



**Fiscal Year 2016-17 Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of

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Before the

Committee on Housing & Neighborhood Revitalization

Council of the District of Columbia

The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building

Room 412

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20004

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2016

10:00 A.M.

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization, Committee staff, and members of the community. My name is Laura Newland, and I’m the Executive Director of the District of Columbia Office on Aging (DCOA). I am honored to testify today on the activities and accomplishments of the Office on Agingin Fiscal Year 2016 and Fiscal Year 2017, to date.

Before I begin, I’d like to thank our sister agencies and community partners who work hard every day towards making the District a place where people of all ages and abilities can thrive. Thank you for your support, and partnership as we work to provide life-sustaining programs and supports to seniors, people with disabilities, and caregivers throughout the District.

I want to recognize my incredibly talented staff, some of whom are here today, who demonstrate the highest level of commitment to the work they do in delivering programs, supports and services to enhance the lives of so many District residents. With me at the table is my Chief of Staff, Garret King. He’s central to ensuring the agency operations are efficiently and effectively meeting the evolving needs of our population.

I’d also like to thank Mayor Bowser for her unwavering support and leadership. I’m proud that the work of our agency is driven by her commitment to D.C. values and her vision of making D.C. the best city in the world for people of all ages to live, work, play and age well. Finally, thank you to the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, HyeSook Chung. I’m looking forward to working closely with her as we continue to become more data driven, performance oriented, strategic and equitable in our service-delivery model.

Mayor Bowser’s administration remains committed to investing in pathways to the middle class by investing in education, infrastructure, public safety, and people.  The Fair Shot Budget for fiscal year 2017 (FY2017) was the first budget developed wholly under Budget Autonomy. For the first time since Home Rule was passed in 1973, the District was able to spend our local dollars without having to wait on Congress to pass the federal budget. This brings us one step closer to operating like the 51st state. My team and I have worked hard over the past year to ensure that the spirit of the Fair Shot Budget is evident in how we operate. Last year, we had an ambitious agenda for FY 2016, turning our attention towards increased accountability, transparency and improving the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the programs and services residents rely on. We also wanted to make sure seniors in the District led the conversation around aging in this city. We did this through providing more opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. Today, I will provide an update on the agency’s performance and highlight some of our key accomplishments.

The mission of the District of Columbia Office on Aging (DCOA) is to advocate, plan, implement, and monitor programs in health, education, and social services that promote longevity, independence, dignity, and choice for older District residents, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. The agency operates the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC), which provides a coordinated system of information and access for individuals seeking long-term services and supports. Additionally, the agency funds a Senior Service Network (SSN) comprising 20 community-based, non-profit, and private organizations that operate 37 programs. These programs provide services that are vital and life-sustaining for District seniors, people with disabilities, and their caregivers.

According to the 2016 DCOA Needs Assessment, more than half of District seniors live alone and one-third of our seniors report having a disability. Additionally, nearly a quarter of our seniors live on less than $18,000 a year. I’m reminded, when I read these statistics, of how important it is to truly understand our residents on an individual and personal level. In order for DCOA to fulfill its mission, we need to make room at the table for those whose lives are impacted by the decisions we make. I’m also reminded of the importance of our advocacy role in amplifying the voices of our community and forging strong and productive partnerships with our sister agencies to ensure our residents have access to the programs and services they need to thrive in their homes and in their communities.

**KEY FY16 ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

I’d like to highlight some of our accomplishments in fiscal year 2016, to date:

**Safe at Home**—As you know, Madam Chair, we partnered with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to create Safe at Home in FY16, a program that promotes aging in place for seniors and adults with disabilities by offering home accessibility adaptions to reduce the risk of falls and reduce mobility barriers. The Safe at Home Program began operating on January 4, 2016, and the original budget in the pilot year was $1 million with a projection to serve up to 100 clients. By the end of the fiscal year, the Safe at Home budget was $1.75 million. We’ve been able to assist clients like Ms. H. Ms. H. is 92 and was sleeping in a recliner chair on the first floor of her home because she was not able to reach her bedroom and bathroom on the top floor. Through Safe at Home, Ms. H. received a chair lift, and adaptive equipment in her bathroom. She’s able to sleep in her own bed for the first time in years. This program is allowing Ms. H. to continue living in the community where she wants to be. And where she belongs. As of January 2017, 311 projects have been completed and 104 projects are currently in construction.

Thanks to Mayor Bowser’s support and the partnership with DHCD, I’m proud to announce that what was originally planned as a $1 million pilot, has become the largest DCOA program with $8.7 million committed for fiscal year 2017. Thanks to your advocacy, the partnership of DHCD, and the Mayor’s commitment to aging in place, Safe at Home is a model program with an investment that is unmatched anywhere else in the country.

**Town Halls**— Madam Chair, last year, I told you we wanted to listen and engage more. And we did. In FY 2016, we focused on building trust, spending more time out in the community, and having more meaningful conversations about our services and supports. We wanted to make sure that seniors, people with disabilities, and caregivers are driving the conversation around what’s needed for individuals to age well in D.C. The results from the Needs Assessment tells me that we need to continue.

Since last year, our town halls have become more interactive. We share information about the agency, how we’re structured, what types of services are offered, and how many people are served by each service category. We’ve started asking for explicit and specific feedback. Seniors have presented to me suggestions for improvements, ideas on how to prioritize services, and anything and everything else they wanted to share with me and my team.

I also wanted to increase opportunities for seniors to participate in the agency’s decision-making process, particularly when it comes to programs and services they use. Prior to the finalization of budgets, our Senior Wellness Centers are now required to hold open budget town halls where participants are given budget information for their center and voted on programming for the next fiscal year. This participatory budgeting gives our seniors meaningful input on the services and programs they use.

**New EPD Waiver enrollment process—**DCOA continued its partnership with DHCF and launched a new enrollment process for the Elderly and Persons with physical Disabilities (EPD) Waiver, which allows people who would otherwise receive care in a nursing home to remain in the community. The new enrollment process improves customer service and reduces wait times for the EPD Waiver. We’ve been able to get through the final high volume of case assignments, case closures, application follow up, and other administrative tasks associated with eliminating the yearlong backlog. We continue to work collaboratively on mapping the customer experience, a process to visualize our customer’s journey through the enrollment stages that will better enable us to make impactful changes that improve customer service.

**Eliminating Service Overlap—**In FY16, DCOA and the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) worked with grantees that provide case management and transportation services to identify Medicaid-enrolled clients and began the process for grantees to become Medicaid-approved providers. DHCF has worked closely with our grantees as they become Medicaid providers. We’re eliminating duplication, using local dollars more effectively, and the affected grantees will have an additional source of revenue for service provision.

**CONCLUSION**

Before I end my testimony, I’d like to talk about what we are planning for FY 17. First, if you’ve read our 2016 senior needs assessment, you’ll recognize that our immediate goal this fiscal year must be to improve our communications. We’re developing a comprehensive communications plan that will allow us to engage more with the community, better target underserved populations, and ensure messaging is accurate and consistent across all stakeholders. We’ll also be expanding our Ambassador program to include ongoing community training on DCOA programs, as well as quarterly workshops covering a variety of issues that are important to seniors. Through proactive and ongoing engagement with Ambassadors, we’re providing the resources and tools to empower our community to help all of us look out for our seniors and people with disabilities most at-risk of isolation.

In addition to better engagement with DCOA ambassadors, we’re also expanding our reach to underserved populations. This year, we’re partnering with the Department of Corrections to plan resource fairs for confined populations of seniors who will be returning to the community. We’ll be holding resource fairs every other month, presenting information on DCOA services as well as services provided through our sister agencies and community partners, like Legal Counsel for the Elderly. Mayor Bowser reminds us of the importance of DC values and second chances. I’m proud to say that DCOA is guided by these values as we look for ways to ensure that all residents have access to information and services they need to age well in D.C.

Also, in FY 17, Mayor Bowser has committed $4 million towards capital improvements of our Senior Wellness Centers. With this substantial investment, we will be making building upgrades and updates to the interior—which the participants will help choose.

In closing, Madam Chair, I’d like to thank you for your leadership and support. And for always reminding me that my duty is to seniors, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. We are working hard to become a national leader in providing innovative and transformative programs to make D.C. the best city in the world to age. And we’ll continue to rely on our seniors to lead. This concludes my formal testimony. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.