**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**Office on Aging**



Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of

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Before the

Committee on Housing & Community Development

Council of the District of Columbia

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee, Committee staff and members of the community. I am Laura Newland, the Executive Director of the District of Columbia Office on Aging (DCOA). I am pleased to testify before you today on Mayor Browser’s Fiscal Year 2017 Budget.

The Bowser Administration is committed to ensuring all residents in all eight wards have a fair shot and a pathway to the middle class. When Mayor Bowser recently testified before the Council, she discussed the smart and critical investments in education, public safety, infrastructure, and most importantly, in our District residents. She wants to ensure our city is affordable and accessible for everyone—whether you have been here for five minutes or five generations—and especially for our seniors and people with disabilities. Her age-friendly vision is that no matter your age, no matter your income, you can always make a good life for yourself in the District of Columbia, and you will see that in the Mayor’s proposed budget for DCOA.

For fiscal year 2017, DCOA restructured its budget to increase transparency. Changes include creating new categories of spending that reflect DCOA’s priorities such as Lead Agencies and Case Management, Caregiver Support, Transportation, and Nutrition. In restructuring the budget, we focused on creating a budget that made it easier to see how much DCOA is allocating to various activities, highlighting the District’s significant investments in the community. Because of the structural changes to the budget, we know that the budget book comparison of fiscal year 2016 to fiscal year 2017 seems to suggest significant changes in budget priorities from fiscal year 2016. I want to reassure you, Madam Chair, and the members of the Committee that this is not the case. Our priorities remain constant.

One of my commitments to the Mayor, this committee, and to District seniors was to have meaningful conversations about the services and supports offered by DCOA and other District agencies. We started that conversation last summer. Not only did we restructure the budget to increase transparency about our programmatic spending, we conducted an aggressive outreach campaign to discuss DCOA’s proposed fiscal year 2017 budget. As part of that effort, we held ten budget town halls in all eight wards that included all of our senior wellness centers, affinity sites, and community hubs. These town halls were in addition to our regular quarterly town hall schedule, and we also attended several other community events where we discussed the budget with District residents, including three Budget Engagement Forums hosted by Mayor Bowser. District residents were thoughtful, engaged, and supportive of DCOA’s efforts to 1) become more transparent, 2) work more collaboratively with our sister agencies and community partners to eliminate duplication and inefficiencies, and 3) become a data-driven agency, which includes doing more to engage our seniors and people with disabilities about DCOA programming.

DCOA’s proposed FY 2017 operating budget totals approximately $40.5 million with 63 full time employees. This is relatively unchanged from the prior year’s budget. Approximately 75 percent of DCOA’s budget comes from local dollars. The agency is still committing more than 90 percent of the total budget allocation to direct services in the community to support seniors, people with disabilities, and caregivers.

Before discussing specific changes to the proposed fiscal year budget, I want to reiterate that DCOA’s budget priorities remain largely the same. The life-sustaining and life-enhancing programs on which the District’s older residents, people with disabilities, and their caregivers have come to rely will continue at current service levels. DCOA will continue to host events where we celebrate District seniors, including the Centenarian, Ms. Senior DC, the Senior Symposium, and the Mayor’s Annual Holiday Celebration.

So now let’s talk about the changes in the fiscal year 2017 proposed operating budget. As I noted earlier, the most significant change is to the budget structure. We will also be directly billing Medicaid in fiscal year 2017 for DCOA’s many Medicaid-related activities, which will show up as the newly established “Federal Medicaid Payments” source of funds in 2017. In fiscal year 2016, DCOA received two on-time enhancements: one to conduct a needs assessment for virtual wellness centers in Wards 2 and 3 and the other to increase our home delivered meals budget. Because both enhancements were one-time, they were not included in fiscal year 2017 formulation, but I’m pleased to say that our total nutrition budget for fiscal year 2017 actually increased from fiscal year 2016. DCOA also recently awarded a grant for the needs assessment to George Washington University, which will be completed this fiscal year. We’re excited to have an analysis of our current service array and the needs of our District seniors that will allow us to fairly allocate resources across all 8 wards.

We’ve also taken a hard look at our own internal operations and staffing. After conducting an extensive review, we found significant cost-savings by right-sizing our staffing through a consolidation of position functions and cutting out administrative spending that was not critical to agency functions. An example of this is the savings we achieved by making simple decisions like moving the annual Senior Symposium from a downtown hotel to historic Dunbar Senior High School and leveraging internal resources to replace our contract with an event planning company.

I’ll now address programs that I know many people in the community are concerned about, including the Senior Service Network. As noted earlier, I’ve discussed everything we’re talking about today with District seniors in all 8 wards, and at each of my 10 town halls and numerous other community events, I found overwhelming support in the work that we’re doing to reduce duplication, eliminate inefficiencies, and being open to adapting our service array to better meet the needs of the community we work so hard to serve.

One of my first tasks in leading this agency was to look at the District’s transportation spending for seniors and people with disabilities. Currently, the DC Office on Aging provides free curb-to-curb transportation for seniors 60 and over through our Seabury Connector grant. It’s a wonderful service. When we looked at the ridership for Seabury, we saw that more than 80% of the trips were for medical trips. I immediately thought of my colleagues at the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) because DHCF oversees Medicaid-funded transportation services. The difference is that DCOA reimburses Seabury through our grant for actual costs, while DHCF pays for Medicaid transportation on a per capita, per month basis. So what does that mean? That means that DHCF is paying for medical-related transportation for eligible Medicaid beneficiaries whether or not they’re using the Medicaid provider. And if a Medicaid beneficiary uses Seabury to get to a covered medical trip, that means that the District is paying for that trip through Medicaid and paying for it again through DCOA. So we’re working with our grantee to shift all Medicaid-eligible trips to the Medicaid provider, while still providing trusted transportation services through Seabury for all non-Medicaid-eligible trips. This will allow us to save more than $500,000 in fiscal year 2017.

As you know, Madam Chair, DCOA has been working with the Transportation Collective to better align the District’s transportation services for seniors and people with disabilities. The Transportation Collective is comprised of DCOA, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), DC Taxi Cab Commission, and DHCF. Through the Transportation Collective, we found out that the District spends approximately $63 million on several transportation options for seniors and people with disabilities, but the key issue is easy access to residents. The Transportation Collective is working on finding ways to make sure our residents can access available transportation options while making sure the District better aligns the programs to eliminate duplications and inefficiencies, including exploring “one-call, one-click,” which is a program that allows people to call one number and be directed to the appropriate transportation service.

Another core program that DCOA reviewed is case management. I want to be clear—case management is a vital service that allows people to live and receive care in the community. And for those who need case management, they should only have one case manager. Through my work in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, I became very knowledgeable of the Elderly and individuals with Physical Disabilities Waiver (EPD Waiver), which is offered through Medicaid. The one required service through the EPD Waiver is case management. When we did a program evaluation of the EPD Waiver, we found out that DCOA’s lead agencies were sometimes providing case management services to people on the EPD Waiver. So for some people, the District is paying twice for case management—through Medicaid and through DCOA. For fiscal year 2017, DCOA is requiring that our lead agencies become Medicaid providers to eliminate this duplication and streamline the delivery of services for our seniors and people with disabilities. We want to ensure that people are receiving the services they need. And that the District is only paying once for those services. We expect that we’ll see cost-savings of more than $200,000 in fiscal year 2017 by not paying for duplicative case management.

Finally, another collaboration that I want to mention is our work with the Department of Employment Services (DOES). Currently, DCOA has two (2) employment specialists who support seniors with training and employment searches. While these employees do incredible work linking older workers to employment in the District they should not be working separate from an agency that has the expertise. So in FY17, DOES offered to expand their senior employment services and will include the two current DCOA employees in their senior employment unit, which again streamlines services for seniors while giving DOES additional resources to combat senior unemployment and underemployment.

We all understand the importance of collaboration in providing the best services and supports to our community. As you might have noticed through my testimony, collaboration is the driving factor in everything that the agency does—whether it’s with sister agencies, non-profit partners, or the private industry, we must work together to create a strong community that supports aging in place and living a good life. These collaborations are critical in achieving the Mayor’s vision of making the District a world-class age-friendly city.

I’ve talked a lot today about collaborations that will provide significant cost-savings to DCOA in fiscal year 2017, so before I end my formal testimony, I’d like to briefly mention another collaboration that has allowed the District to create a new program that filled a gap in the community. Madam Chair, you’ve been asking us for some time to create a program that allows people to age in place with accessible modifications. So with your leadership and the Mayor’s commitment to housing programs, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) partnered with us to create Safe at Home, a new program we started in calendar year 2016 that provides grants up to $10,000 for home adaptations that allow seniors and adults with disabilities to live safely in their homes. This is a program that DCOA and DHCD are incredibly proud of—rightly so. We heard from you, District residents, and advocates in the community that there was a need we weren’t meeting, and we quickly and efficiently created this program with lots of input from stakeholders. And it’s been a resounding success. This is just one example of what we’re capable of with the laser-focus of Mayor Bowser’s administration, the support of this committee, and really listening and working with the community.

As you can tell, Madam Chair, we are constantly asking ourselves how we can do more and be better. DCOA is committed providing great customer experience while being smart and responsible with government dollars. I want to also thank you, Chairperson Bonds, and this Committee for your leadership and unwavering support of seniors, people with disabilities, and their caregivers in the District. You hold us to the highest standard because that’s what District residents deserve. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions the Committee may have.