

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Aging and Community Living



**Fiscal Year 2020-2021
Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of
Laura Newland
Director

Before the
Committee on Housing and Executive Administration
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson

Monday, March 15, 2021
12:00pm

Good afternoon, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration, Committee staff, and members of the committee. My name is Laura Newland, and I'm the Director of the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL). I'm pleased to testify today on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser on the Department's accomplishments during Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021, to date.

Before I get started, I'd like to thank Mayor Bowser for her strong leadership during one of the most challenging times in our city's history. I'd also like to acknowledge the incredible staff at DAACL. I'm so proud of my team and the way they've faced each day with dedication, commitment, and optimism for our community—never once refusing to step up and take on new tasks and to fill in where they were needed most. It was exactly one year ago today when we had to quickly close our offices, our in-person sites, and suspend all of our programming. During the Public Health Emergency (PHE), we lost the luxury of time. We've never asked our staff and community partners to adapt so quickly, and to take quick action on new ideas. Seemingly overnight, we had to adjust to new ways of accomplishing our work, while figuring out life in a pandemic, which, for many of us, meant balancing caregiving with conference calls.

At DAACL, we serve seniors, aged 60 and older, adults with disabilities, and their caregivers. Our mandate includes upholding the core values of service, excellence, respect, compassion, integrity, and accountability. It also includes leading efforts to strengthen service delivery and capacity by engaging community stakeholders and partners to leverage resources.

Madam Chair, at the start of the PHE, we often talked about what we would do when things returned to normal. But over the past 12 months, it's become clear to all of us that there is no going back to business as usual. This past year has been difficult for all of us and devastating for so many. We've seen COVID-19 hit our community hard. We've lost family members,



friends, and neighbors. We've seen the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on our older residents and communities of color. We all stayed home to flatten the curve and keep each other safe. The risks of loneliness and isolation increased for all of us, and we've had to understand and meet our emotional risks just as much as our public health risks.

The Mayor has tasked all of us with making sure critical needs are met today, and pushing forward to create stronger and more resilient communities for our residents tomorrow. While we may encounter some bumps in the road as we continue to face unprecedented challenges for our city, there's no doubt that we, as a city, will rise to the challenge as we have demonstrated this past year. Now, more than ever, it's so important that we continue to move forward—together.

As my staff will tell you, and as you've heard from some of our community partners at the public testimony, sometimes that means doing things we've never been asked to do before. Whether it means rolling out new operational standards, taking extra time to call someone you may have never met, serving in new capacities to support city-wide responses to the PHE, or quickly launching new programs, we've done so much—not because we've felt ready, but because it's what the community needed right now. DACL, grantees, and partners will agree that this past year has been focused on expansive possibilities—even when it seemed impossible. We know that supporting our community during these incredibly challenging times requires us to push ourselves and each other to be better than what we thought was possible. I'd like to tell you about some of the work we've already been able to accomplish over this past year.

The PHE required us to respond quickly and adapt our programming overnight to keep our community safe. At the same time, we were also able to launch several new initiatives to provide additional support to our older Washingtonians. This includes:



- Moving all dining site participants to home-delivered meals and increasing meal delivery capacity to serve 6,600 district seniors! We've delivered more than 2 million meals in the past year.
- Launching the brand-new Call & Talk program, currently providing seniors with friendly check-in calls and conversations.
- Supporting citywide efforts with staff dedicated to critical details including the Contact Trace Force, Citywide Hotline, and the Board of Elections.
- Launching the Seniors Stay Cool program, making sure that income-eligible seniors could stay home and stay cool during heat emergencies, with A/C repairs and replacements. In one month, the program served nearly 100 seniors.
- Launching the Senior Technology Pilot Program providing iPads and technical support to low income, isolated seniors to allow them to stay connected to family, friends, healthcare, information, and activities.
- Hosting the first-ever Virtual Mayor's Annual Senior Symposium on Channel 16, which included a special meal delivery for more than 800 seniors.

Meanwhile, we continued to maintain critical life-sustaining services such as Senior MedExpress, providing transportation to essential medical services for District residents needing to get to their chemotherapy or dialysis appointments in the safest way possible. Our Safe at Home Program also continued to operate, installing more than 1,000 in-home safety adaptations in FY20 and FY21 to date, while strictly adhering to health and safety guidance from DC Health.



Due to the safety concerns during PHE, DACL grantees could no longer provide many of the traditional programs. Still, to meet the needs of seniors and caregivers, DACL quickly repurposed grantee staffing to prevent social isolation and promote connectedness and wellbeing for seniors. In addition to repurposing staff, DACL grantees converted all in-person activities to virtual programming; however, we know that not everyone has access or is connected to the technology required to participate in those virtual programs. To maintain these connections, we've asked DACL grantees to conduct regular reassurance calls to participants. This contact includes a wellness check, reassurance or socialization call for all seniors and caregivers, regardless of whether they are connected to other virtual wellness programming. The frequency of calls and level of contact are determined by a completed risk assessment and the participant's preference. Through this effort, we've expanded our reach to more than 10,000 seniors.

There's no question that the past year has been traumatic; however, we all need a reason to experience joy. DACL has partnered with the Humane Rescue Alliance to offer something we've never tried before—a visit with rescue animals via Zoom and, when it's safe to do so, in-person visits. In addition, we partnered with the DC Public Library to reach out to the community in all eight Wards to make Valentine's Day cards for all 6,600 meal delivery clients-- about three times as many as the previous year. This campaign is so special to us because we're not only able to brighten someone's day with a kind note, but we're also able to emphasize the importance of community to residents of all ages.

These initiatives have also created new outlets to reach more residents who may not have known of DACL. Thanks to these partnerships, DACL has been able to earn more media coverage highlighting the activities of the agency and expanding our outreach beyond our typical



distribution channels. During the past year, DACL has been featured on ABC7, NBC4, Telemundo, Voice of America, WHUR, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Informer*, and *The Washingtonian*. In addition to the earned media opportunities, DACL continued to use every opportunity to reach as many residents as possible through paid media and virtual outreach. This included two large mass mailings distributed to over 80,000 residents, age 60 and older, in FY20. DACL also launched its virtual events website, which receives more than 7,000 visits monthly. This is in addition to the Around Town website, which received more than 109,000 page visits in FY20 and connected 746 older residents to virtual and wellness activities from the comfort of their own homes.

We also continue to focus on community outreach, and in FY21 we'll be launching a new citywide campaign targeting all District residents and emphasizing the importance of reaching out to older neighbors, potentially isolated seniors, adults with disabilities, and caregivers. Over the holidays, DACL engaged residents in a volunteer effort to call homebound seniors on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. We coordinated more than 280 volunteer calls over the three holidays, and many of those relationships continue today. Through this initiative, we learned that there was a real desire in the community to reach out to isolated seniors, but people weren't quite sure where to start. Recognizing this gap, we're developing a formal volunteer program as a part of this campaign and we look forward to rolling it out in the coming months.

Madame Chair, I want to reiterate that the agency, the Mayor, and the community we serve are not aspiring to just a return to normalcy. We're all committed to creating something better, more equitable, stronger, and more resilient. While we've done a great job in the past year through our programs and support services, I believe that we have an opportunity to do even



better by working together, thinking expansively, being creative, and most of all, continuing to listen to our community. The challenges of the pandemic have only deepened our commitment and ignited an even greater sense of urgency in reaching seniors who need us--no matter what. Given all of the great things we've been able to accomplish during this critical time, I'm confident that we can do much more than a return to normalcy. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

