

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



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

Testimony of
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Director

Before the
Committee on Housing & Neighborhood Revitalization
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson

Monday, June 15, 2020
9:00 AM

Good afternoon, 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 am the Director of the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL). I am pleased to testify today on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser to discuss the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) budget for the agency. Before I get started, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the incredible staff at DACL. Over the past several months, they have quickly adjusted to new ways of accomplishing their work, balanced caregiving and conference calls, and faced each day with dedication and commitment as we worked together to navigate our new normal. I have never been prouder to be a District government employee. I would also like to thank our grantees and contract partners—the public health emergency has forced all of us to adapt and change, and our network has been a willing partner as we seek to identify and meet the changing needs of our community.

Madam Chair, even in the toughest times for our city, it is so important that we continue to move forward—together. Last Month, Mayor Bowser presented her Fiscal Year 2021 Budget and Financial Plan. While the financial impact of COVID-19 requires us all to make sacrifices, the Mayor remains steadfast in the District’s commitment to maintaining the critical services our residents expect and protecting our most vulnerable neighbors. By finding ways to save resources and by leveraging federal dollars, the Mayor is ensuring that we do not lose ground on our shared progress in the District. As the Mayor says, we are all in this together, and we will get through this—together. The Mayor’s FY21 budget is driven by DC HOPE—Health, Opportunity, Prosperity, and Equity and the FY21 budget is a testament to her commitment to DC Values, even in times of unprecedented crisis.



Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

These past months have been particularly devastating for our older adults in the District. As social distancing and quarantine became necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19, our senior wellness centers, adult day care programs, and group activities quickly closed, and seniors were told to stay home as much as possible and avoid contact with others outside of their immediate household. The pandemic left many of our seniors more alone than they have been in a long time—maybe ever.

The Public Health Emergency required us to respond quickly and adapt our programming to make sure our current participants were not isolated. We also knew we had to reach more older adults at risk of social isolation. Thanks to the Mayor’s leadership, DACL was able to work with our staff and our network of more than 20 community-based partners to move in-person programs to phone calls, texts, and online programs. We also launched several new initiatives to provide additional support to our older Washingtonians. This includes:

- **Home-delivered meals.** We increased our meal delivery by 268 percent, delivering meals to more than 6,400 District seniors— many of whom are new to DACL services. Since the start of the public health emergency, DACL has delivered more than 447,000 meals to seniors—and that number increases every week.
- **Launch of DACL’s “call and talk” line.** DACL provides a friendly voice and conversation to those in need of a connection. We are currently serving around 100 older District residents through this program, many of whom are interacting with DACL for the first time. Through this program, we are creating new friendships with DACL staff and



seniors in the community. Residents like Mr. and Mrs. Bruner from Ward 7. Mrs. Bruner is 75 and serves as a primary caregiver to her husband Mr. Bruner, 87. Calls from my staff to the couple have grown into regular video conferences. They enjoy talking about gardening, travel, and their favorite hobbies while staying home. Once this pandemic is over, we will continue to connect with the Bruner's and encourage them to take advantage of some of the great in-person wellness and social activities available from our agency and our community partners.

- **Regular confidential wellness and reassurance calls.** Participants in DACL-funded programs and services are receiving regular check-in calls from our service providers.
- **Mailings to seniors.** We are planning two big mailings this fiscal year to seniors to make them aware of DACL and city services with support from the Mayor's Office. We want to make sure we are reaching out to those who might not be connected to us yet.
- **Technology for seniors.** In partnership with the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) and the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF), we will be launching a technology connection program for qualifying seniors to connect with telehealth and online social and wellness programs.

Madam Chair, combatting social isolation and loneliness in the District has been a top priority for the Mayor since the start of her administration. This current pandemic and social distancing measures have created even more urgency in reaching as many seniors as possible through as many means as possible—all while continuing to maintain a safe social distance. We know that no one program or idea will end social isolation, but now is the time to invest in the great ideas that exist in our communities. Starting this fiscal year, DACL is excited to launch a new mini-



grants program that will make available small grants to neighborhood-based organizations and individuals interested in leading activities that keep seniors engaged and connected. We are looking for new and innovative ways to connect with the older residents in their neighborhood. We are looking for solutions that focus on new ways to promote social connections, eliminate the digital divide, and ensure the health and well-being of our seniors through hyper local efforts that leverage community and volunteerism. Madam Chair, more than half of District residents over the age of 60 live alone. Through this effort, we are leveraging the strengths and creativity of our community to reach those who need us the most. We cannot wait to hear all the great ideas that exist in our neighborhoods.

While this pandemic has been particularly trying for the community we serve, DACL will continue to use this opportunity to be imaginative and think expansively about our programs and services. We know we have an opportunity to rethink our service delivery model to better meet our residents wherever they are and no matter the changing landscape. Our service delivery model itself must be designed to embody the changes that we know are coming.

FY21 Budget

Despite the financial challenges facing the District for FY20 and FY21, the Mayor's commitment to seniors remains strong and includes significant continued investments. Programs and services that support and encourage our older residents to stay active, engaged, and safe continue to be top priority for this administration. For our older adults, having a dedicated space to connect with others, participate in wellness activities, and enjoy a meal with friends is key to remaining vibrant and active as they age. Thanks to the Mayor's capital



investments, we will continue our work in expanding two of our Senior Wellness Centers and establish a new senior site in Ward 8. I am pleased to announce that the new Ward 8 site will be co-located at Kramer Middle School in Anacostia. Based on the feedback we've gathered from the community so far, Kramer is an ideal location with plenty of available parking, ease of access, and opportunity for intergenerational programming. As promised, we will be engaging with the community on what they want to see at this new site. Investing in the health and well-being of our seniors also means that we are investing in our District's unpaid caregivers.

Through our partnership with the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Mayor's total capital investment of \$35.5 million, the Therapeutic Recreation Center in Ward 7 will undergo a complete renovation and include dedicated space for caregiver support and respite.

The FY21 budget also includes continued investments in Safe at Home at \$5 million, which will enable us to make more than 800 homes safer through in-home safety modifications. We continue to invest in critical transportation services with \$1.8 million to provide free transportation to essential medical trips such as dialysis and cancer treatments for our older Washingtonians.

In addition, we are monitoring the current conditions closely and adapting our regular programs to the needs of the community through each phase of re-opening. Our nutritionists, who are currently managing home meal delivery, will make sure residents stay connected to the nutrition programs that best meet their individual needs during the changing circumstances. Our in-home support services and case management programs will make sure seniors have the supports they need. Our network will continue to create regular programming through video chats, telephone



conference calls, and online forums so seniors have a way to connect to others from the safety of their own homes. In just the past few months, our grant partners have hosted LGBTQ virtual social hours and coffee and conversations, cultural competency training, virtual outreach presentations, Older Americans Month celebrations, caregiver support groups, and even the 18th Anniversary Celebration of the Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center! We've been impressed by our community's interest and involvement in participating in online programming. While we know that not everyone is able to access online programming, we are focused on providing as many options as possible, whether through telephone engagement, programming available on Channel 16, or regular check-ins to allow us to continue to bridge the needs that we are seeing in the community.

Madam Chair, we're also planning ahead to when we can safely reopen. We're working closely with DC Health to modify as needed when our wellness centers and other in-person activities can continue. And we will continue to support the virtual programming model because it's been so popular. Virtual programming will allow more people to participate and receive the benefits of socialization, education, and wellness, without leaving their homes.

As the Mayor said, we are all in this together and we will get through this together. We all need to make some sacrifices to maintain our most important programs and services for our residents. The Mayor has already taken steps to reduce spending in the current fiscal year by implementing a hiring and spending freeze across government. Changes in the DACL budget are primarily internal with no impact to our programs and services to seniors. This includes a \$1.8 million allocation for Adult Protective Services to reflect their permanent transfer from the Department



of Human Services. In addition, due to the hiring and spending freeze and to continue to prioritize critical services for the community, the 10-Year Strategic Plan will be postponed. We will, however, continue implementing our federally mandated State Plan on Aging while working with our grantee network on revising our service standards and ensuring an equitable service experience across all programs and services. We are also focusing on the main Safe at Home program along with security cameras, so we will move away from the cost-share Safe at Home program due to the very low interest in the community over the past year.

Last year, we worked with our network of grantees to update and make improvements to our service standards for assessment, case management, and counseling—services provided in all eight wards of the city—to provide a more seamless coordination of care for our clients. We continue to use this time as an opportunity to develop stronger and more coordinated systems to enable us to better identify people who are in need of services and how we can best meet those needs. Through this effort, we are holding ourselves and our grantee network even more accountable to ensure that residents are receiving the high-quality services they need to age well and thrive—no matter where they live in the District.

Conclusion

As the Mayor has said, when the FY 21 budget was originally developed, the world and the District were in a much different place than we are today. Thanks to her leadership, this budget continues to reflect her strong commitment to our older adults, adults with disabilities, and caregivers—despite our significant financial challenges. I am proud that the DC HOPE Budget represents the Mayor’s ongoing commitment to seniors, adults with disabilities, and caregivers



and includes significant investments in critical programs in FY21. Madam Chair, I usually end my testimony by saying that the District is the best city in the world to age. Thanks to the leadership from our Mayor and your support, we continue to prove that DC is truly the best city in the world to age!

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

