

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



Fiscal Year 2022-2023
Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Director

Before the
Committee on Housing & Executive Administration
The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson

Monday, March 21, 2022
10:00 AM

Good afternoon, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration, committee staff, and members of the community. 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 to discuss the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) budget for the agency. This budget is an example of the best of government: The Mayor committing to end senior hunger, and isolation and loneliness by supporting new and innovative programs; seniors pushing us to think more broadly; and DAACL staff always being open to innovation and ready to meet and collaborate with the community throughout the District.

Last week, Mayor Bowser presented her FY23 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan to the Council – a budget that builds on the FY22 Recovery Budget and sets the path towards helping more Washingtonians build a future in a safer, stronger, healthier, and more equitable DC.

Madam Chair, last year at this time we were focused on meeting the urgent needs of our residents throughout the Public Health Emergency (PHE). Whether it was tripling our meal delivery capacity, launching new programs to stay connected, adapting our operations based on the current public health guidelines, or distributing iPads to keep isolated seniors connected to programming and healthcare, we faced the challenges head on. Now, as we are creating a new way of living together, the Mayor continues to push us to be more equitable and take on big challenges. By making continued investments in affordable housing, public safety, working to end homelessness, and increasing food access, we are making sure that our older adults, adults with disabilities, and caregivers can thrive and live boldly in a city that is stronger than ever.

DAACL has never been better positioned to tackle the tough road ahead. The Mayor has given us unprecedented resources to end senior hunger and combat senior isolation, all while making sure our residents can continue to live and thrive in the homes and communities they



know and love. This year, we are focusing on programs that promote independence, choice, and dignity for our community. I'd like to now take a moment to talk about the work that we've already done and what's ahead for all of us as we continue to focus on an equitable recovery for our residents.

Ending Senior Hunger

Madam Chair, ending senior hunger is a top priority for all of us—the Mayor, DACL, the Council, non-profits, and the community. DC has the highest rate of senior hunger in the nation with 13.5 percent of seniors reporting they are food insecure according to a 2019 study conducted by Feeding America. In a city as prosperous as ours, this simply should not be the case. Last month when I testified on Bill 24-419, the “No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021,” I told you about some of the important work of the agency and our community partners thanks to the Mayor’s FY22 investments of close to \$4 million to combat isolation and end senior hunger in the District. This includes:

- bringing our home-delivered meal program and nutrition assessments into the agency—forming a nutrition team led by a top nutritionist with decades of experience in DC;
- commissioning a study on the underlying drivers of senior food insecurity specific to DC; and
- launching innovative new pilot programs that include fresh produce delivery, food pantries, shuttles to grocery stores, pop-up community events with food distribution, and senior farmers markets.



In FY23, the Mayor is committing an additional \$750,000 towards a new grocery gift card pilot program. With this investment, we're building off the success we've already seen through similar programs focused on providing cash relief to alleviate challenges and stabilize communities¹. Some clients who are currently part of our home-delivered meals program (and are able to shop for and prepare their own meals) will now have the option to receive these funds instead of prepared meals. We'll also be working with clients who don't quite meet the criteria to remain on the home-delivered meals program, and clients who currently receive SNAP benefits, but need a little more to close the food affordability gap that may be a barrier in choosing healthier, more nutritious options.

In addition to the work at our agency, the Mayor continues to make food access a top priority throughout her administration and has launched several initiatives to expand food options and choice for all residents. This includes a \$58 million Food Access Fund with the goal of eradicating food deserts, supporting local businesses, and increasing equitable access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. In addition, the FY22 Budget Support Act changed the Supermarket Tax Credit to focus eligibility to areas most in need of grocery stores, expand support to more fresh food retailers, and add community engagement requirements for grocers. These investments prioritize equitable food access, particularly in Wards 7 and 8. As a result, more than 162,000 residents will gain food access points within one mile of their home. I know that you'll agree when I say that we're all fully committed to using every tool in our toolbox to end senior hunger—not tomorrow, not next year, but now. It will take the entire administration working together to craft a complete solution, but this is a goal we truly believe we can achieve.

¹ <https://greaterdc.urban.org/thrive-providing-cash-relief-dc-residents-hit-hardest-pandemic>



Combatting isolation and loneliness through technology

The PHE created a greater urgency to bridge the technological divide with older generations. After two years of limited in-person gatherings and more activities moving online, (including healthcare appointments, access to information and services, and social connections) connecting our older generations with technology has never been more essential. In FY21, DACL launched a senior technology pilot program, providing about 500 iPads to low-income seniors to combat social isolation, promote connectedness to family and community, improve health through telehealth services, nutrition education and wellness activities, and develop or enhance digital literacy. The response to this program has been incredible with 74 percent of participants self-reporting an increase in social connections with friends and family, 57 percent reporting increased participation in community activities such as church, and 37 percent reporting increased access to health care.

In FY22, DACL will be expanding this program to provide devices for up to 1,000 additional seniors and, thanks to the Mayor's \$2.6 million investment in FY23, DACL will continue expanding this program to serve our home-delivered meals clients who tend to have more mobility challenges and less community support. Madam Chair, this historic investment will provide iPads, technology support, training, and connectivity to thousands of older adults. By bridging the technology divide, we can bring socialization, wellness, and educational opportunities to seniors who might not otherwise be connected.

Keeping seniors in DC

The Mayor is making big investments to make housing more affordable for our residents, including an historic \$500 million toward the Housing Production Trust Fund, \$110 million to



rehabilitate or replace more than 1,500 units of public housing—much of it for seniors—over the next three years, creating a new \$10 million fund to increase access to homeownership for longtime Black DC residents, \$1 million to assist multi-generation families in maintaining their family property after the initial owner passes away, and instituting a 2% property tax cap for seniors, which lowers the amount that property taxes can go up every year. These investments will ensure our seniors continue to have choice in housing options in DC, where we want them to stay, and where they want to be.

We're also committed to ensuring that our seniors who currently have housing can remain in their homes for as long as possible. As the Mayor often says, "the best senior housing is the housing where you currently live." We never want a resident to age out of their home simply because it's not safe enough to get from one room to the next, to make a healthy meal, or to take a shower. The Mayor created the Safe at Home program nearly six years ago in response to concerns she heard in the community about the very real fear of falling or suffering from other household accidents. This program has helped more than 4,500 District residents continue to live in their own homes through the installation of safety adaptations such as grab bars, safety railings, stair lifts, and bathtub cut outs. In FY22, DACL changed the program's income eligibility criteria to solely focus on the individual applying and their spouse instead of the entire household. This means that residents who may not have qualified for the program previously due to living with other family members whose income pushed them above the threshold may now qualify.

In FY23, we're expanding the Safe at Home program further to provide additional benefits for eligible participants. Currently, the program focuses on one of four categories of falls risk—environment. In addition to environmental adaptations, the Center for Disease Control



names medication, vision, and balance/strength as factors for preventing falls. Our expanded Safe at Home program, which we're calling Safe at Home 2.0, will allow participants to voluntarily participate in evidence-based balance and strength training classes offered virtually and in-person to accommodate a variety of abilities. DACL will also partner with optometrists to provide vision screening for participants.

We know that most seniors prefer to continue living in their own homes and neighborhoods as they grow older. Safe at Home 2.0 will deliver a more holistic program for residents who would otherwise need to consider other housing options because it's simply no longer safe for them to remain at home. Thanks to the Mayor's investment, Safe at Home 2.0 is creating greater independence, choice, and dignity for our older adults in DC.

Conclusion

Madam Chair, the FY23 budget recognizes the countless sacrifices all of us in the District have made during COVID-19. The FY23 budget is making up for lost time and ensuring that every Washingtonian can build a future here in D.C., no matter their age, stage, or ability. We know that ending senior hunger and combatting isolation and loneliness are not simple tasks, but with the Mayor's commitment to District residents, your support, and the support of our community partners, we're ready to continue to face these challenges head on.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I have with me Jessica Smith, Chief Programs Officer and Senior Advisor to the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. We look forward to answering your questions at this time.

