

Government of the District of Columbia
Department of Aging and Community Living



Fiscal Year 2022-2023
Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Charon P.W. Hines
Acting Director

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

Friday, March 3, 2023

10:00 AM

Good morning, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration, and Committee staff. My name is Charon P.W. Hines, and I am the Acting Director of the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL). Today, I am honored to testify on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser on the Department's performance during Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, to date. Here with me today is Garret King, DACL's Chief of Staff, and Jacob Wong, DACL's Chief Operating Officer.

I want to begin by first expressing my gratitude to Mayor Bowser for this appointment. Thank you, Mayor, for your leadership, tireless work to ensure the District continues to thrive, and for entrusting me to serve our city's oldest and most respected residents. I also want to acknowledge my predecessors who have come before me at the agency – the late E. Veronica Pace, Jearline Williams, Dr. Clarence Brown, Donna Duntston, Dr. John Thompson, Brenda Donald, Laura Newland, and most recently, Jessica Smith. I am incredibly grateful for the strong advocacy and leadership of the previous directors, and I look forward to building upon their important work. I want to acknowledge and thank the incredible staff at DACL. The team's commitment to our older adults, adults with disabilities, and caregivers is paramount to the agency's success and our ability to ensure District seniors can live boldly.

While I am new to the agency, I am no stranger to DC or DC Government. As a third-generation Washingtonian, the most important role I've held to date is community servant. For the past four years, I've had the pleasure of serving our city's youngest residents as the Senior Advisor to the DC Public Schools Chancellor, Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee. Before that, I served the more than 700,000 residents, including our seniors, as the Director of the Mayor's Office on

Community Affairs affectionately known as MOCA. I have always strived to serve the very communities who have made me the woman I am today, and that same effort will continue as I take on the critical role of DACL's Director.

As the daughter of a disabled Gulf War veteran, I have been able to experience the programs and services DACL provides to residents through the lens of my father and maternal grandmother. I know firsthand the importance of social services, including senior services, and the impact they have on those who use them. As the Acting Director of DACL, I am committed to ensuring that our city's oldest residents are getting the highest level of care and service they need and deserve.

The mission of DACL is to advocate, plan, implement, and monitor programs in health, education, and social services for the elderly; to promote longevity, independence, dignity, and choice for aged District residents, District residents with disabilities regardless of age, and caregivers; to ensure the rights of older adults and their families, and prevent their abuse, neglect, and exploitation; to uphold the core values of service excellence, respect, compassion, integrity, and accountability; and to lead efforts to strengthen service delivery and capacity by engaging community stakeholders and partners to effectively leverage resources.

Madam Chair, while I have been in this role for less than 30 days, I know that the team at DACL has been laser focused on three core areas that are necessary in supporting older residents – socialization, transportation, and nutrition.

Socialization is a crucial component of healthy aging and combatting senior isolation is one of the Mayor's top priorities for older adults. As a part of the Mayor's #DCisOpen initiative, DACL has been hyper-focused on bringing seniors back to our wellness centers and our citywide events. During the past year, DACL hosted several events that kept seniors connected, engaged, and informed, including Senior Fest, the Ms. Senior DC pageant, the Mayor's Senior Symposium, Brain Games, Centenarian Salute, the Mayor's Senior Holiday Celebration, and the Mayor's Senior Budget Engagement Forum. These events, including the community outreach events we host have allowed us to connect with more than 10,000 seniors from all eight wards of the city.

During my first week, I visited our six senior wellness centers and our Ward 3 satellite center on Valentine's Day. As part of our 7th Annual Cupid's Kids Initiative, we distributed over 3,500 handmade Valentine's Day cards to our home delivered meal program recipients and at our wellness centers, which were created by DC Public and Charter School students throughout the District. I also visited two of our community dining sites, Lamond Recreation Center and Plymouth at North Capital, and the new So Others Might Eat (SOME) Karin House at Walter Reed's complex. In addition to my visits, I met with our Senior Service Network, the Senior Villages, our external partners at AARP DC, and our LGBTQ Senior Advisory Committee. Over the next 60 days, I plan to visit more of our community dining sites, meet with more members of our senior service network, and engage with more of our city's older residents at their places of residence, work, and leisure throughout the District.

Transportation is another important issue for seniors in the District. Many seniors struggle with transportation access, which can lead to social isolation and other issues. At DACL, we have been committed to developing innovative solutions to help seniors get around the city. One of our most significant accomplishments is the Connector Card program. This program provides seniors access to a variety of transportation options, including Uber, Lyft, and WMATA bus and rail. And because of the Mayor's FY23 \$1 million investment in transportation access for seniors, we've been able to expand the Connector Card program, which now helps more than 2,250 seniors get where they need to go, providing them with up to \$100 a month in travel funds.

Madam Chair, alongside transportation and socialization, senior food insecurity is a critical concern in the District. As we have navigated through the health, social, and economic challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, these past two years have only exacerbated this complex issue among older adults. However, as the Mayor continues to remind us, we know we can do better. To address this issue, we partnered with the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger (NFESH) to analyze DC-specific data, compare it to national trends, and review how our senior wellness centers and community dining sites are improving the health of participants. This partnership focuses on addressing nutrition and health gaps and developing new strategies and programming to ensure all sites help seniors live healthier lives. The research has already shown us that participants in our nutrition programs show high rates of food security and the food insecurity rate in the District, compared to the national rate, is actually driven by financial and housing insecurities, rather than simply a deficit in food and nutrition programming. Our work with NFESH is ongoing

and we look forward to providing a full report on September 30th.

In addition to our partnership with NFESH, the Mayor has invested \$750,000 in combating senior food insecurity by launching the Food4Choice Grocery Gift Card Pilot program in November of FY22. This pilot helps 450 qualifying seniors receive grocery cards with \$125, which will be reloaded each month for the next 10 months. Seniors can use the funds at any grocery store in the District to purchase food of their choosing, giving seniors the autonomy to make their own nutritional decisions. While the program has reached maximum capacity, our team will track the data in hopes to expand this program in the future.

And for our seniors who are homebound, the Mayor invested \$2.6 million to expand our senior technology program, which, in part, allowed DACL to further diversify our home-delivered meals program. Through this investment, we ensure our seniors are receiving not just a home-delivered meal but also a social connection with others, providing a direct connection to a DACL nutritionist as well as the opportunity to participate in a virtual dining site and wellness center which features virtual programming specifically designed for older adults with limited mobility. All of these features are available through our DACL App, which can be found in the App store on mobile devices.

And to take a step further in moving the needle forward, DACL has been working with the Lab @ DC and the Age-Friendly DC Nutrition Task Force to create a Food Access Tool that will foster coordination and collaboration among the several organizations across the District that work to meet residents' nutritional needs. With this tool, we are getting seniors on

the right nutrition programs, maximizing the way seniors and other residents are benefiting from all the nutrition services our city has to offer. This level of collaboration will allow us to combat food insecurity head on.

In addition to these enhancements and new initiatives, we are currently serving 2,643 seniors in our Home Delivered Meals program and 1,595 seniors are served per day at our 40 community dining sites across the city.

Madam Chair, while socialization, transportation, and nutrition have been the priorities of the agency, we know that in order for seniors to have access to safe spaces, reliable transportation, and healthy foods, it is imperative for them to feel safe in the very homes and communities they know and love. That's why I am proud to highlight the Mayor's investment in her signature program, Safe at Home, which provides safety adaptations in and around the homes of qualifying seniors and adults with disabilities. In FY22, 941 projects were completed, and 432 projects have been completed to date in FY23. Through a follow up survey conducted by American University to evaluate the program's efficacy, we learned that 99 percent of past Safe at Home participants were satisfied with the program, and 80 percent of those participants had not fallen since their adaptations were complete.

While this initiative has helped make more than 5,500 households safer since its inception through the installation of safety adaptations such as grab bars, hand railings, stair lifts, and bathtub cut outs, we wanted to push ourselves to further alleviate the risks of falls for older adults in the District. Thanks to the Mayor's investment, we are able to work with our

partners, Home Care Partners and American University, to offer seniors more options to reduce the risks of falls and support them as they age the way they want and choose. With Safe at Home 2.0, we will focus on all four of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's categories of falls risks – environment, medication management, vision screenings, and balance/strength training. Since the beginning of January 2023, Safe at Home 2.0 clients have been participating in vision screenings, medication management, and evidence-based balance and strength training classes offered by Home Care Partners and American University.

Before I close Madam Chair, I want to highlight the work of our Future of Aging Initiative, which started last fiscal year. This past summer, our Future of Aging team spoke to more than 400 community members, including seniors from every ward, adults with disabilities, and caregivers at library workshops, our senior wellness centers, grocery stores, phone conversations, and during virtual listening sessions. Through these unique interactions, we have learned that we are serving a very diverse senior community, one that desires to connect with DACL in ways they haven't before, like through text messaging and other tech-savvy applications, and we are actively working to meet those requests.

Through the activities of our Future of Aging Initiative, 79% of the participants identified as Black, and 75% of the participants had low incomes, which are both critical demographics of populations which DACL aims to serve. Additionally, we held workshops in Spanish and Mandarin. Through this initiative, we heard over and over that transportation is the lifeline connecting older adults to medical care, food, the community, and social events that help them thrive, and we need to invest in it. We heard that older adults want

opportunities to continue learning and leading in their communities, and we heard about their fears of growing isolation. The District already offers some of the best senior services in the country, and with this feedback, we can continue meeting the needs of seniors as they have determined and prioritized as most important to live and grow older in our city.

In conclusion, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am incredibly proud of the progress we have made at the Department of Aging and Community Living over the past two years. We have made great strides in our nutrition, transportation, and socialization initiatives, and we are committed to continuing this important work. We will continue to listen to and engage with seniors, prioritize innovation and equity, and hold ourselves and our partners accountable for delivering high-quality services. Thank you for your support of our agency and for your continued dedication to the well-being of our older residents, adults with disabilities, and those who care for them. I look forward to answering any questions from you and the committee.