Government of the District of Columbia

Department of Aging and Community Living

Fiscal Year 2023-2024
Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Charon P.W. Hines
Director

Before the

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

Thursday, February 1, 2024

9:30 AM

Good morning, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Executive Administration and Labor, and Committee staff. My name is Charon P.W. Hines, and I am the Director of the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL). Today, I am honored to testify on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser regarding the Department's performance during Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024, to date. Accompanying me today are Angela Richardson, DACL's Chief of Staff, and Melanie Johnson, DACL's Chief Program Officer.

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to Mayor Muriel Bowser for her exceptional leadership. During the most difficult moments our city has faced, she has consistently shown dedication to the residents of Washington, DC. Her unwavering commitment has played a crucial role in navigating our city through unprecedented challenges, and I am honored to be a part of her Administration. I also want to acknowledge and thank the incredible staff at DACL and our entire Senior Service Network. The team's commitment to our seniors, adults with disabilities, and caregivers is paramount to the agency's success and our ability to ensure District seniors can live boldly. And I would be remiss if I did not thank our seniors. Madam Chair, the DACL team often hears me say, "for without the seniors, there is no us." We could not do the work that we do every day if it were not for our city's older adults holding us accountable and pushing us forward. For that, I am extremely grateful.

The mission of Department of Aging and Community Living (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, I am so proud to stand before you today to share that for the past 11 months, 29 days, and 48 hours, I have served in the capacity as DACL Director, fulfilling the very mission I just shared. While this has not been a small feat, I am overjoyed by all that we as an agency have accomplished under my leadership. Back in May at my confirmation hearing, I shared with you that our seniors deserve an accessible, effective, and responsive government agency on aging to meet their most pressing concerns and needs so that they can age on their terms. The team at DACL has taken this vision and ran with it, remaining laser-focused on five core areas that are necessary in supporting older residents: socialization, transportation, nutrition, keeping seniors in their homes and communities, and providing high-quality services.

Socialization is a crucial component of healthy aging, and combating senior isolation is one of the Mayor's top priorities for older adults. What we all have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that all of us, no matter our age, need human connection to thrive. Since the end of the District's Public Health Emergency, 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: the Mayor's Senior Budget Engagement Forum, Senior Fest, the Ms. Senior DC pageant, the Mayor's Senior Symposium, Brain Games, the Centenarian Salute, the Mayor's Senior Holiday Celebration.

This year's Centenarian Salute Luncheon was the first since the pandemic, celebrating more than 50 older residents aged 100 or older!

In addition, we took combating social isolation a step further by ensuring our seniors were able to participate in our city's most popular parades by providing open-air transportation in the Capital Pride Parade, the Palisades 4th of July Parade, the Fiesta DC Parade, and the Martin Luther King Day Peace Walk and Parade. By organizing transportation for these parades, we are ensuring our city's older adults remain connected and engaged in activities designed for the entire city to come together.

These events, including the 246 community outreach events we hosted, have allowed us to connect with more than 28,800 seniors from all eight wards of the city, a 17.7 percent increase from our reach last year. Not to mention, the countless conversations I have been able to have with seniors during my frequent time in the community. While these outreach engagements serve as an opportunity to have fun with the seniors, they also serve as critical moments for me to listen, react, and then act! I sit down with them, listen to their concerns, take those concerns right to the respective teams at DACL, and together, we find concrete solutions for those residents.

Transportation remains a significant concern for seniors in the District. Many face challenges accessing transportation, leading to social isolation and other issues. At DACL, we are committed to developing innovative solutions to assist seniors in navigating the city. One of our most noteworthy achievements is the Connector Card program, providing seniors with access

to various transportation options, including Uber, Lyft, and WMATA bus and rail. In FY23, the Mayor allocated a $1 million investment in transportation access for seniors, enabling DACL to expand the Connector Card program and offer seniors up to $100 a month in travel funds. And, in this year's budget, the Mayor made a $1.5 million investment in transportation access for seniors, reaffirming her commitment to ensuring more seniors can benefit from this popular program. To date, DACL has assisted more than 3,800 seniors in reaching their destinations.

Commented [OJ(1]: Noteworthy that this provides more than just transport—it means access to fulfill daily life activities, meet their healthcare needs, and to connect with family and social networks throughout the city.

In FY18, DACL introduced Senior MedExpress, another innovative transportation program benefiting older adults in the District. This program offers roundtrip transportation through Yellow Cab Company for qualified District seniors attending essential life-sustaining medical appointments or appointments related to public benefits. Madam Chair, we understand that seniors desire more flexibility in scheduling, convenience, and access to additional rides. Senior MedExpress has continued to address these needs through our partnership with Yellow Cab, serving over 4,600 seniors to date.

Madam Chair, in addition to addressing transportation and socialization concerns, senior food insecurity remains a pressing issue in the District. While data from Feeding America indicates that 11.5 percent of DC seniors are food insecure, DACL is actively employing every tool in our toolbox to combat this statistic and ensure every senior has access to healthy, nutritious foods. I am pleased to report that through our diverse meal programs, 13,425 seniors are currently receiving nutrition support. Whether they benefit from our Home Delivered Meals program, enjoy daily lunches at over 40 community dining sites across the District, or exercise their choice through the Food4Choice program for grocery decisions, we are committed to meeting the food needs of older adults in the District. This

effort brings us closer to closing the senior food insecurity gap.

Madam Chair, while socialization, transportation, and nutrition have always been top priorities for us at DACL, we are also steadfast on ensuring that seniors can continue to age in place within the communities they know and love. The Mayor consistently emphasizes that the best housing for older adults is the housing they already have, leading to the creation of her signature program for seniors, Safe at Home. In FY23, 1,026 projects were successfully completed, and 202 projects in FY24 to date. A recent evaluation conducted by American University revealed that 90 percent of past Safe at Home participants expressed satisfaction with the program, and 79 percent of these participants reported not experiencing falls since the completion of their adaptations.

Since its inception, Safe at Home has contributed to making over 6,590 households safer through the installation of safety adaptations such as grab bars, hand railings, stair lifts, and bathtub cutouts.

To ensure a more comprehensive program for residents, the Mayor expanded Safe at Home in FY23, providing seniors with additional options to reduce fall risks and support them as they age the way they want and choose. With Safe at Home 2.0, we concentrated on all four categories of fall risks outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – environment, medication management, vision screenings, and balance and strength training. To date, 129 seniors received vision screenings, 102 seniors received medication management, and

529 seniors participated in evidence-based balance and strength training classes offered by Home Care Partners and American University.

Recognizing the growing demand for seniors to age in place and benefit from this innovative program, in FY24 the Mayor reinforced this commitment by increasing the income eligibility cap from 80 percent of the Area Median Income to 100 percent Median Family Income. This investment raised the eligibility threshold from $79,700 for an individual to $99,600 and from $91,050 to $113,850 for a household of two. With these additional funds, DACL anticipates completing an additional 200 projects in FY24, bringing the total to over 1,150 projects.

Before I conclude, Madam Chair, I want to highlight the exceptional work of our team at DACL and reiterate our continued commitment to providing high-quality services. As I mentioned earlier, I often convey to the team that without the seniors, there is no us. I am adamant about all of us, including myself, receiving the necessary development to better support our seniors and address their needs. This past summer, Ms. Johnson and I had the opportunity to attend the US Aging Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. This conference brought together professionals from various fields, all united by a common goal: to ensure that every older American, regardless of their background, color, or zip code, has access to the resources and services they need to live boldly. This conference, along with many other professional

development opportunities, including the Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) Conference, National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA) Annual Conference, the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) Conference, that our staff has participated in, has made our agency more determined than ever to lead with compassion and empathy, building our capacity and professional toolkit, while continuing to advocate for DC's oldest residents.

I would be remiss if I did not mention two critical projects our teams led this past fiscal year – the completion of DACL's 2024–2027 State Plan on Aging and our Adult Protective Services Unit Accreditation. The State Plan was created with significant community input and is designed specifically to serve our city's older adults and adults with disabilities. Through listening sessions hosted across the city, we heard from over 400 residents and used the lessons learned to develop the plan's goals and strategies. This plan will guide our service delivery and program development for the next four years and will serve as a benchmark for measuring our success and effectiveness.

And while we await the results of the APS Accreditation, I could not be prouder of the outstanding work our APS unit has put forward in protecting the lives of our most vulnerable. To date, the team from the Council on Accreditation has given our work high praise, noting that our APS team is truly dedicated to the residents of the District and the vast amount of resources we offer to the community – more than many other jurisdictions!

In FY23, our agency implemented bold changes and decisions, all underscoring our unwavering dedication to the well-being of seniors in the District. First, we made a significant move demonstrating our commitment to impactful partnerships, with DACL assuming the role of the lead agency for Ward 1, working even more closely with our longtime grantee, East River Family Strengthening Collaborative. Additionally, through our FY23 Lead Agency Grant initiative, we marked a historic moment – the first time in a decade that we revamped our grant program, and DACL made its debut as a lead agency for a ward. The Lead Agency grant program seamlessly aligns with our mission of providing comprehensive, person-centered services tailored to older adults' unique needs as they age. After a thorough selection process involving community members and our dedicated staff, we proudly announced the following community-based organizations as our FY24 Lead Agencies:

- Ward 1: DACL and East River Family Strengthening Collaborative
- Ward 2 & 3: Iona Senior Services
- Ward 4: Genevieve N. Johnson Senior Day Care Program
- Ward 5 & 6: Seabury Resources for Aging
- Ward 7 & 8: East River Family Strengthening Collaborative

These organizations showcase an extraordinary capacity to deliver high-quality senior services, positioning them as invaluable partners in advancing our mission of upholding independence, dignity, and choice among seniors across the District.

Madam Chair, we also took another bold step by making the FY24 Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD) funding, made available to DACL by the DC Council, a grant program. This decision provides more organizations doing this important work the opportunity to receive funding. After careful consideration and review by community members and staff, I am

pleased to share that we recently announced Iona Senior Services and Genevieve N. Johnson Senior Day Care Program as the ADRD grant recipients. Through this grant, we will be able to advance programs that make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals and caregivers impacted by ADRD.

The last thing I want to highlight, Madam Chair, is our commitment to ensuring more seniors have access to programming and services designed with them in mind. One of the ways we are doing this is by expanding our reach through capital projects. I am pleased to share that the plans for the new Ward 8 Senior Wellness Center have been approved by the Public Spaces Committee, bringing us one step closer to turning dirt for a new wellness center for our seniors living East of the River.

As you may recall from our time together in November, our team has convened the Ward 2 and Ward 3 Senior Wellness Centers Taskforce. Thanks to your incredible appointments, we have brought together a dynamic group of Ward 2 and Ward 3 residents, as well as DC Government professionals, all eager to see two new wellness centers come to Ward 2 and Ward 3. DACL is working closely with our sister agency, the Department of General Services (DGS), to complete the feasibility study and find two great locations that will serve as a second home for seniors in those respective communities.

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,

especially the accomplishments I have witnessed during my tenure. Now, more than ever, DACL remains dedicated to seniors, adults with disabilities, and those who care for them. Our work does not and will not stop all that we have accomplished to date – we will continue to put our most vulnerable residents first by working with them to create solutions. Thank you for your support of our agency and for your continued dedication to the well-being of older residents, adults with disabilities, and their caregivers. I look forward to answering any questions from you and the committee.