

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



Public Hearing On

Bill 24-0996, the “Senior Nutrition and Well-Being Equity Act of 2022”

**Testimony of
Jessica Smith
Interim Director**

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

Tuesday, October 11, 2022
10:00 AM
Virtual Meeting Platform

Good morning, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration, and staff. My name is Jessica Smith and I'm the Interim Director of the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL). I am pleased to provide testimony on Bill 24-0996, "Senior Nutrition and Well-Being Equity Act of 2022." With me today is Garret King, Chief of Staff at DACL.

Before I begin, I'd be remised if I didn't acknowledge my predecessor, Laura Newland. For more than six years, Laura helped shape the work of DACL and we're incredibly grateful for her leadership and service to our city's older residents, adults living with disabilities, and those who care for them. I'd also like to thank Mayor Muriel Bowser for her leadership and the bold investments she's made and continues to make in our seniors. As we begin the new fiscal year, I'm excited to highlight a few of the FY 23 investments our Mayor has made for older adults.

Chairperson Bonds, Mayor Bowser continues to focus on making sure we're keeping DC a safe and affordable place to live for all residents, especially our seniors. This fiscal year, the Mayor's Fair Shot Budget includes a \$40 million package of Legacy Initiatives that will help our seniors stay in DC, in part by making it more affordable to own and maintain a home. One of those investments is a 2% senior property tax cap, designed to lower the cap on annual increases in property taxes for seniors. Additionally, her budget makes a \$10 million investment to increase access to homeownership for long time Black DC residents, as well as a \$6 million investment over two years to assist low-income homeowners in repairing and maintaining their homes. With these big investments and so much more, the Mayor is doubling down on our efforts to be a stronger, more equitable DC that puts our older residents first.

As the Interim Director of DACL, I'm very proud of the work we've accomplished together since stepping into this role and am excited about the work that lies ahead of us. While

we've experienced some changes, one thing that hasn't changed is our commitment to seniors. And together, our entire agency is renewing our focus on ensuring we're providing high-quality services and resources to our constituents today, tomorrow, and in the future.

At DACL, we recognize the urgency of this bill and support its intention to improve the implementation of nutrition and wellbeing programming, create mechanisms to regularly check on senior's health and safety, distribute quarterly mailers, expand our direct engagement with seniors, and ensure professionals and community members have access to senior-specific training. The need for greater coordination and collaboration with the Council is critical and we know that, together, we can further improve how we address nutrition and improve the quality of life for seniors in the District. While we have some ways to go, I want to take a few minutes to highlight what our agency is currently doing to address senior food insecurity and wellbeing.

First, we're working to ensure the collection of strong data is a priority across the agency. We know that data driven decision making creates opportunities for greater transparency, accountability, and improved service. I'm excited to share that we're bringing on a new Chief Operating Officer (COO), one that has an extensive background in building systems and creating data-driven cultures across District Government. And, in addition to bringing on a strong COO, we're focused on building a team who will ensure our agency and our grantees are making the data driven decisions our community deserves. This data will help accomplish the intended goals of this bill, by guiding us in the creation and restructuring of our programs and outreach services.

Further on our data improvement efforts, our Future of Aging Initiative, which started last winter, is laying the groundwork and building a foundation to sustain a data driven culture at DACL. 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, and during virtual outreach events. Through these unique interactions, we bettered our understanding of the level of diversity that exists in our senior community. This is also a community that desires to connect with DACL in ways they haven't before, like through text messaging and social media platforms. We've also learned that our community knows about our services and considers DC to have some of the best services around. With that being said, the issue that was consistently brought up the most by our seniors, and viewed as one of the most critical, is transportation, often referred to as "the link" to everything our seniors need and want — healthcare, food, and socialization.

And while we know transportation is a critical need in the District, we also know that senior hunger and food insecurity is a highly complex issue, and one that none of us take lightly. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an individual to lead an active and healthy life. And across our country, we know that these past two years have likely only exacerbated this complex issue of food insecurity among older adults. But in a city like ours, with a Mayor and a Council who is committed to combatting both senior isolation and hunger, we know we can do better. That's why we've partnered with the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger (NFESH) to dig into DC specific data, compare what they find to national trends, and review nutrition equity and food quality in our senior wellness centers and community dining sites. Through this partnership, we're focusing on addressing nutrition and health gaps while working to develop new strategies and programming that will ensure all our sites are helping seniors live healthier lives. We're excited to see the data this partnership will bring and confident we can move the needle forward in combatting senior hunger in our city.

One factor that we've observed as a contributing factor to senior food insecurity is that

getting to the grocery store can be a barrier in and of itself. One of the ways we're helping seniors have greater access to nutritious foods and so much more is through the Connector Card program, which is receiving a \$1 million dollar investment this fiscal year to expand transportation availability. To date, more than 2,000 seniors are enrolled in the Connector Card program and our team is focused on signing up even more seniors.

And we aren't just helping seniors get to and from the grocery store, doctor appointments, and other points of interest; we're also launching a program that's going to give 450 qualifying seniors the autonomy to choose the types of foods they want. Thanks to the Mayor's \$750,000 investment, this fall we're launching the Food4Choice Grocery Gift Card Pilot program. Through this program, seniors will receive monthly grocery funds, nutrition educational resources, and ultimately, make their own nutritional decisions. And to ensure every program is data driven, we'll be testing the impact these nutritional decisions have on seniors' physical and mental health.

In addition to the Food4Choice program, Chairperson Bonds, you may recall the senior nutrition program we launched in FY21, "Eat Well Live Better!". In partnership with Mary's Center, this program delivered grocery boxes twice a month to participants, as well as individualized nutrition education and coordinated care with their healthcare providers. And as a result of the Mayor's FY22 investment of \$646,000, we are able to continue this program in FY 23, having served 911 seniors and delivering more than 16,500 food boxes to date.

Creating programs to give seniors choice, autonomy, and access is a huge priority for DACL and we know that using the Connector Card program to get to and from the grocery store is not possible for everyone. That's why, for those who have to remain at home, we want to make sure they're getting more than just a home delivered meal. Through the Mayor's \$2.6 million investment in tablet distribution and technology resources, we're able to ensure our homebound

older adults have access to the boarder community. We've expanded our home delivered meal program to not only include meals delivered right to seniors' doors, but devices that provide a direct connection to a DACL nutritionist and the opportunity to participate in a virtual dining site and wellness center that will feature virtual programming specifically designed for older adults with limited mobility. All of these features will be available in our new DACL mobile phone application. So, if you head over to the app store on your phone and type in DACL, you'll see one of the newest ways we're meeting seniors where they are and further bridging the digital divide.

As we continue moving the needle forward, we're also working with the Lab 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're getting seniors on the right nutrition program, maximizing the way seniors and other residents are benefiting from all the nutrition services our city has to offer. And by working together, we can identify the gaps and combat food insecurity head on.

Madam Chair, the Mayor often says, "it doesn't matter if we have the best programs in the world if no one knows about them." That's why we're zeroing in on our communications and outreach efforts both internally and externally, because we agree with you and this bill that we could do more. In my role as Interim Director, I spend several hours per week in the community. From Ward 8 to Ward 3, our outreach team has been focused on meeting seniors where they are, hosting the Mayor's Annual Senior Symposium, visiting senior housing communities, connecting with seniors at local grocery stores, and attending community and citywide events like H Street Festival and MPD's National Night Out. And we're excited about how this bill will expand our outreach to seniors through more mailers and wellness check programs.

In addition, we've been heavily engaged with our network of DACL ambassadors and the

Commission on Aging, providing the latest information regarding programs and services and working closely to design and implement services with them and their peers in mind. And, we're coordinating with our sister agencies across District Government, hosting lunch and learns twice a month where we're sharing information on how our colleagues in other agencies can support our city's older residents. We recognize the importance of ensuring our sister agencies and community partners have the information they need to effectively service our older residents.

As we move forward, we're keeping the wellbeing of our older residents at the forefront of our work. The Mayor continues to make historic investments in our seniors and with the FY23 investments focused on access, affordability, and equity, we know that we can continue to create a DC where our seniors are living healthy and thriving lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. We're happy to answer any questions you might have.