

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



Fiscal Year 2021-2022
Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Director

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

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10:00am

Good morning, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration, and Committee staff. 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 on the Department's accomplishments during Fiscal Years 2021 and 2022, to date.

Before I get started, I'd like to thank Mayor Bowser for her leadership. The past couple of years have brought unprecedented challenges for the District as we have responded to a once in a lifetime pandemic. And yet, Mayor Bowser has ensured that the District has continued to thrive, embracing new ways to serve our residents while keeping everyone safe. I'd also like to acknowledge the incredible staff at DACL, who show up every day to serve the residents of the District, making sure that our older adults, adults with disabilities, and caregivers have access to the services and supports they need to live boldly! The past two years have shown us how much we can accomplish together even through the most difficult times.

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, last year at this time, I told you that the Mayor tasked every agency with making sure that our residents' critical needs are met today, while we build stronger and more resilient communities for our residents tomorrow. For DACL, that meant making sure that our



residents continued to have access to key nutritional support, socialization, and connection to information and resources throughout some of the most challenging days for this city. We needed to maintain the programs and services that so many of our residents rely upon, while also looking towards the future of growing older in this city, especially as we are confronted with historic adversity and uncertainty. The city's response to COVID-19 brought us all together in a shared fight to stop the spread of the virus by getting vaccinated and boosted, encouraging our friends and families to do the same, taking precautions like washing our hands, staying home if we felt sick, and maintaining social distance. But it brought us together in so many other ways as well. During a time that imposed so many limitations, we focused on the possibilities. We got iPads and technology training in the hands of nearly 500 older adults, we delivered close to 2.8 million meals during the public health emergency, we welcomed our seniors back to dining sites when it was safe to do so, we expanded the ways in which we engage our residents by providing more options through hybrid events, and we connected close to 200 volunteers to engage with older adults during the holidays. We reimagined our service-delivery model to better leverage the strengths of our community partners while more effectively working towards our common goals of combatting isolation and ending senior hunger in the District.

We're proud of what we've been able to accomplish together at a time that required adaptability in the ever-changing face of this global pandemic. Yet, we all recognize that there's much to be done. When I started in my role as Director over six years ago, I made a commitment to spend as much time as possible just listening. Listening to the community that we serve and understanding their experiences, concerns, fears, and motivations. Through the feedback we've obtained over the years, we've created programs like Safe at Home and LGBTQ social activities, we've adapted our essential medical transportation programs, we've experimented with different



models of outreach, and shortened wait times for clients seeking to enroll in the EPD Waiver program.

What we know from this experience is that our community is our greatest resource when it comes to creating a stronger and more resilient Washington, D.C. Madam Chair, I often tell you about all of the great things we've accomplished over the past year, but today, I'd like to tell you a little more about the future of aging in D.C. and how our agency is shifting and adapting to the experiences of older adults, adults with disabilities, and the caregivers of this city.

At DACL, the future of aging is all about listening to our community and working *with* our community as we turn their insights into action--together. In Fiscal Year 2022, DACL created the Future of Aging workgroup to work with our community stakeholders, including the residents we serve, our community partners, other organizations and individuals, and our staff to take a holistic look at our intake and assessment process, identify pain points in the system, and gather ideas from the community to alleviate those pain points. Intake and assessment are the backbone of our agency. It's about making sure our residents are connected to the right services and supports at the right time and in the easiest way possible. A well-designed intake and assessment system is critical to combatting isolation and ending senior hunger in the District. As you know, this fiscal year, we transitioned to providing case management and nutrition assessments in-house. By doing so, we're able to limit the number of transfers between organizations, with the goal of decreasing the time between initial intake assessment, and connection to the most appropriate services and supports, ensuring that the process is quick and seamless. Our Future of Aging workgroup is focused on working closely with clients who are moving through this system, understanding the ways in which they connect with our Agency and



our suite of programs and identifying ways in which the system could continuously be improved and made easier to navigate based on our client's feedback.

Madam Chair, I'd like to take a minute to discuss why this is so important for us in this moment. We've always been an Agency that listens to our community. By doing so, we've been able to create some incredible programs. This focus on the future of aging is a continual commitment for the Agency. It's about creating the internal structures that allow for greater adaptability and an environment that is committed to changing as the perceptions, experiences, and needs of our community change. We've learned over the past two years that our Agency and our community partners can adapt and create —things that we've never been asked to do or even imagined doing before. The future of aging is all about integrating the real experiences of our community and creating an Agency structure that is adaptable to those experiences and one that is always willing to push the boundaries of possibility.

Madam Chair, we've done this through our senior-driven socialization hub model by asking our lead agencies to create something new and different based off of the interests of the seniors they serve. We've done this through our ConnectorCard expansion that provides more individual choice in transportation options. And we've done this through our ongoing support of our senior village model. As we like to say, "if you know one senior village, you know one senior village," because each of our senior villages is designed specifically to serve the unique needs of the individuals it serves. We've also done this through our partnership with the Humane Rescue Alliance, where we're connecting older residents who are animal lovers with adoptable pets and their foster parents. Madam Chair, I've spoken about this unique way that we're connecting with older adults, but I want to share with you how this program came about. At the start of the pandemic, DACL sent a survey to some of our program participants asking what



types of activities they'd like to participate in. One of the responses was from a senior who mentioned that her dog had recently passed and she would just like a pet owner in the neighborhood to stop by her house so she could just "pet their dog." At a time when we were all asked to stay home and keep a safe social distance, we recognized that something as small as a few minutes with a neighbor's pet could be effective in building stronger community connections. From there, our partnership with the Humane Rescue Alliance started. The future of aging is about exploring the possibilities and turning insights from the people we serve into actions.

This also means that we're creating better and more effective ways to listen to our community. We'll be doing this through a series of interactive workshops with our seniors, community stakeholders, and staff, working with focus groups, and—something we've already started—engaging in in-depth diary studies with a small diverse group of seniors to get a first-hand look at their experiences of growing older in D.C. This also means that we are working with the community to identify emerging issues and develop ideas on how to resolve them. Whether the issues are as seemingly small as connecting seniors to pets, or as large as ending senior hunger, the future of aging is about how government can support strong communities in confronting the challenges of today and preparing for the challenges of tomorrow, together.

Madam chair, before I finish, I want to address some of the work we're doing as we face one of the toughest challenges for our city—ending senior hunger. 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. We know that COVID-19 has likely further exacerbated this inequity. In a city like ours, with a Mayor who is committed to inclusive prosperity for every resident, with strong leadership and investments into programs that enable our residents to thrive, no



senior who lives in the District should be hungry. We know that combatting hunger is a multifaceted and highly complex issue that demands a very thoughtful approach, and we're thankful for your support as we continue to work together towards ending senior hunger. This fiscal year, DACL is focused on taking an in-depth look at the underlying drivers of senior hunger in the District. We will be soliciting through an RFP, the assistance of national experts on senior hunger to identify the root causes and understand the experiences of residents at risk of hunger or malnutrition. The results of this project will serve as a blueprint to pilot new models of outreach and service delivery to ultimately end senior hunger and malnutrition. We're committed to our continued work with the Mayor, the community, and Council as we all work together to end senior hunger in the District.

CONCLUSION

Madam Chair, last year I told you that DACL, the Mayor, and the community we serve are not aspiring to a return to normalcy. I told you that we are all committed to creating something better, stronger, more equitable, and more resilient. Since then, we've transformed our service delivery model, bringing case management and nutrition assessments into the agency, worked with our grantee partners to create and launch new and innovative programs to combat senior isolation and senior hunger, maintained critical services through the changing circumstances of the public health emergency, expanded our outreach format to create more accessibility both online and in-person, and continued to remain focused on the future of aging in D.C. The challenges of these past two years have shown us that we are stronger and more effective together than perhaps even *we* realized. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

