

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICES



**Fiscal Year 2023-2024  
Performance Oversight Hearing**

**Testimony of  
Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes  
Director**

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

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John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Good afternoon, Chairperson Bonds, Councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Executive Administration and Labor. I am Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes, Director of the Department of Employment Services (DOES). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on DOES' performance in Fiscal Year 2023 and Fiscal Year 2024-to-date. Under the leadership of Mayor Muriel Bowser, DOES continues to support and advance District residents and workers as we champion equitable workforce development and invest in economic security.

As the lead labor and workforce development agency in the District, we provide comprehensive employment services to ensure a competitive workforce, full employment, life-long learning, economic stability and the highest quality of life for all District residents. Over the last year, DOES served over 100,000 customers, provided over 330,000 services, adjudicated over 150,000 claims, and received over 210,000 calls across all programs. This is a testament to the hard work and dedication of my staff to whom I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank for their tireless effort to serve our District residents and business on a daily basis.

My testimony today will demonstrate how DOES has implemented our "Vision Forward" plan in Fiscal Year 2023 to promote the District's human capital; align workforce and education; create equity and access; achieve excellence in service delivery; operate smart and effective systems; and provide best in class customer service.

***Promoting the District's Human Capital***

In FY23, DOES promoted the District's Human Capital by investing in high-quality training opportunities for in-demand local jobs and connecting employers with local talent. We moved the District forward by putting our workers and residents first and by providing solutions that are custom tailored for our communities.



Critical to promoting the District's Human Capital is our commitment to providing high-quality training opportunities. Through the District of Columbia Infrastructure Academy (DCIA), District residents are trained to meet the skilled infrastructure needs here in Washington, DC. DCIA served 670 individuals through its Commercial Driver's License (CDL), Information Technology (IT), Pepco, Solar Works, and Energy, Construction, and Utilities training programs. In FY23, DCIA graduated our 13<sup>th</sup> Pepco cohort, with more than 235 graduates since the inception of the program. One hundred percent of program graduates have received job offers from Pepco or one of their sub-contractors.

DCIA also established a new partnership with OCTO to develop a four-month, 40 hour per week, paid internship for Cisco Certified Network Associate graduates. Interns gain practical experience in a structured environment through shadowing OCTO professionals, completing self-paced projects, access to mentorship, and receiving feedback in real-time.

Alongside our training programs, the Office of Talent and Client Service (OTCS) worked to connect District residents to high-demand jobs and careers by registering 319 new employers and managing more than 57 hiring events resulting in 6,347 District residents having access to employment opportunities in FY23.

DOES is also very excited about the launch of the HBCU Public Service Program, focused on recruiting the next generation of public servants. The HBCU program is a groundbreaking partnership with Howard University and the University of the District of Columbia. This dynamic alliance creates a seamless pipeline for HBCU graduates to enter public service roles, ensuring the DC government benefits from the brightest and most passionate talent. The program will place at least 25 graduating seniors from Howard and UDC in year-long apprenticeships within District government agencies. This immersive experience will combine full-time employment with on-the-



job training, mentorship, and ongoing professional development. Participants will gain invaluable hands-on experience while receiving a competitive salary, benefits package, and paid time off.

### ***Align Workforce with Education***

DOES is helping to drive connections between the District’s education and employment systems. Throughout FY23, we created numerous opportunities for positive youth development by offering diverse access points to career pathways, occupational skills trainings, and work experience. Last month, our Office of Youth Programs (OYP) launched the FY23 application for the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP). In FY23, MBSYEP employed almost 12,000 District youths between the ages of 14 to 24 at over 786 host sites, of which 169 were new host sites. Throughout the summer, youth engaged in trainings and workshops focused on team building, public speaking, personal development, communication skills, community service, increasing employability skills, and college and career preparation.

In FY23, DOES implemented the Middle School Career Exploration Pilot Emergency Amendment Act of 2023, thanks to both you and Councilmember Henderson’s efforts. We launched what we now call the Career Ready Early Scholars Program for students between the ages of 9 and 13 who reside in the District to engage in comprehensive career exploration. In FY23, the program served 1,232 students, of which 55.5% of participants resided in Ward 7 or 8.

Also within our Office of Youth Programs, the Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute is a four-level, year-round leadership training and development program for District Youth between the ages of 14-19. The training model emphasizes practical hands-on experience and a holistic approach to leadership development. In FY23, youth were able to travel for the first time since 2019 and youth leaders participated in a cultural exchange and global-learning program, visiting Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, Canada.



At DOES, we recognize that not all paths to advancement look the same and that patterns of work in America are changing. In Fiscal Year 2023, DOES continued to inaugurate multiple opportunities for in-school youth-focused apprenticeship initiatives. In January 2023, we launched the in-school apprenticeship program providing three youth apprenticeship training tracks: IT, carpentry, and healthcare. In FY23, a total of 17 seniors were enrolled and in FY24 the program expanded to serving 50 high school seniors at IDEA Public Charter school, Luke C. Moore High School, Cesar Chavez High School, EL Haynes High School, Dunbar High School, Capital City Public Charter School, Eastern High School, Anacostia, and Ballou Stay.

Our Office of Apprenticeship Information and Training (OAIT) was a recipient of the FY24 State Apprenticeship Expansion Formula Grant from the US Department of Labor. The grant will allow us to fund 30 participants in pre-apprenticeship programs and to create five new apprenticeship programs in non-traditional sectors. In addition, in an effort to combat teacher shortages, the Department of Labor added teaching as an occupation in the Registered Apprentice Program for the first time in 2022. OAIT was successful in making the District one of the first states to secure apprenticeship registration for the occupation of early childhood special education teacher, in partnership the George Washington University Graduate School of Education, as an apprenticeship sponsor.

### ***Create Equity and Access***

Throughout FY23, DOES made significant strides across our programs to meet the needs of underserved populations, including veterans, persons experiencing homelessness, justice-involved women, returning citizens, and at-risk youth.

Our Division of State Initiatives (DSI) provides vital on-ramps to employment for District residents with barriers to employment, including returning citizens. In Fiscal Year 2023, using



American Rescue Plan funding, a record number of participants were provided with job readiness and life skills training, mental health resources, and placement in subsidized and unsubsidized employment. Project Empowerment served 3,355 participants and DC Career Connections served 729 participants.

Additionally, through the US Department of Labor, DOES received the Partners for Reentry Opportunities in Workforce Development (PROWD) grant to provide targeted employment services to individuals previously federally incarcerated. With this funding, DOES started implementing our Training & Employment Program at Fairview RRC for Women, a federal re-entry facility, and will expand to additional federal re-entry facilities.

In DC, we are fighting to prevent our workers from facing the impossible dilemma of choosing between earning a paycheck and caring for themselves or their families. As a champion for economic security, the DOES Office of Paid Family Leave (OPFL) surpassed 55,000 claims since the inception of the program and paid out over \$105 million in benefits in FY23. Paid leave is essential for a strong workforce and ensuring equitable access can improve health and economic outcomes for our residents.

DOES continued implementing the US Department of Labor Equity Grant this fiscal year, which is providing the agency with funding to audit language access compliance, Section 508 compliance, and readability statistics. To date, we continue to implement changes identified in the audits such as better language access compliance at DCNetworks.org. Additionally, our new Unemployment Insurance Benefits System provides translations in over 20 languages.

***Operate Smart and Effective Systems***

DOES continues to critically assess how we use and present data as an agency. As part of our DataWorks project, the multi-year effort to improve, standardize, and modernize DOES data



management and data use practices, we launched a new Labor Market Dashboard. The dashboard increases transparency and provides access to valuable data and insights such as labor force participation; workforce size and workforce across industries and wards; workforce education; and unemployment trends, benefit claims filed, types of benefits paid out, and more. Refreshed monthly, this information places economic insight directly in the hands of stakeholders, ensuring that they are informed about the District’s labor market. We invite stakeholders to view the dashboard on our website

At DOES we continue to use innovation and modern technology to transform how we provide government services to our customers. Earlier this month, we replaced our decades old legacy unemployment insurance benefits system with a new modernized system. DOES’s new and improved Unemployment Insurance Benefits System (UIBS) is a one-stop-shop where District workers can file claims easily in a more streamlined and user-friendly experience. This new system is easy to use, mobile-friendly across smartphones and tablets, and partners us with ID.me, a robust identity verification technology platform that plays a critical role in safeguarding user information and providing secure access. The UIBS also streamlines our communications with claimants to improve service delivery and response times.

***Provide Best-In-Class Customer Service***

As in previous years, our focus remained centered on consistently meeting customer needs and delivering services at the highest standard.

DOES has been entrusted with many important resources, and we know that the way we deliver our social insurance programs can have a major, immediate impact on people. Our UI team is continuously working to improve the way we serve claimants. In FY23, the Office of Unemployment Insurance processed over 15,600 claims and paid out over seventy-five million



dollars in benefits to District workers. At the time of last year’s hearing, we were experiencing a backlog of over 45,000 unemployment insurance claims coming from the pandemic. As of January 29, 2024, the backlog from the pandemic has been reduced to approximately 16,000 which will be resolved by the end of FY24.

We know that the experience that customers have with front-line staff is critically important and sets the tone for other agency interactions. This last year, DOES continued to implement best practices within our Office of Customer Experience (OCE) to ensure we were providing excellent customer service to each customer that interacts with us, whether in-person, over the phone, or through other electronic means. In FY23, the Office of Customer Experience introduced Storm in our call center. Storm is a cloud-based platform that provides integrated call solutions with stronger analytics, quality control call management and customer satisfaction surveys. Migrating to this new system provides the agency with greater scalability and functionality in the event of unforeseen emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I am happy to report, that since instituting the customer survey functionality in December 2023, 93 percent of customers stated they were served by knowledgeable staff; over 95 percent found staff to be professional when serving them; 90 percent indicated that the service was friendly; and most importantly 80 percent indicated that their inquiry was resolved at the time of the call.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, in this past year, the Department of Employment Services has continued to build on our strong foundation to continue moving the skilled, valuable and determined workforce of the District of Columbia forward. I am proud to continue advancing our vision forward with our new strategic working plan entitled: "H.O.P.E. Helping Others Persevere Equitably." H.O.P.E. reaffirms and reinforces our role as Economic First Responders in the District while





advancing and guiding the agency to efficiency and excellence. In Fiscal Year 2024, through innovation, intentionality and strategic partnership, DOES will be empowered to: achieve organizational excellence, serve as a world-class labor and workforce agency, promote the District's human capital, and create diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. I look forward to working with you and the Council, and to continuing our valuable partnerships with District businesses, employers, educators, workers, and residents, including our youth, to drive workforce development, economic progress and put people back to work. This concludes my testimony. I am happy to address any questions that you may have at this time.

