GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Health

Performance Oversight Hearing on

"FY 2024 Performance Oversight of DC Health"

Testimony of

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Before the
Committee on Health
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Christina Henderson, Chairperson

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

Good morning, Chairperson Henderson, Councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Health. My name is Dr. Ayanna Bennett, and I am the Director of DC Health. On behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser, I am pleased to be before you today to discuss DC Health's performance in Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025 to date.

Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge the selflessness and hard work of our first responders in recent months, including DC Health's emergency management staff. Our dedicated team served the District through the Presidential Electoral Certification and Inauguration, President Carter's funeral, extreme winter weather, and the tragic mid-air collision over the Potomac River. We are keeping those families and others affected by the crash in our thoughts and prayers and encourage all those affected to reach out to crisis services if they need assistance.

These events were supported by our Health System and Preparedness Administration (HSPA), which launched this fall. Last summer, I reorganized our agency to improve efficiency and to support Mayor Bowser's vision of a comprehensive health system for the District. Our new structure merges our health system functions into one

administration, ensuring an efficient and patient-centered healthcare system by attracting high-quality healthcare professionals, ensuring coordination across healthcare entities, and maintaining system-wide resiliency. We're particularly proud of our successful partnership with DCHA and FEMS, begun last summer, to reduce ambulance patient offload times by 25%. This has been a significant concern to health facilities and first responders as well as negatively impacting patients. Comparing this January to January of 2024, we've seen a drop in the longest offload times from 1 hour and 30 minutes to 1 hour and 7 minutes with further improvements to come.

I also launched a new Environmental Health Administration (EHA) in late 2024 to improve and expand our capacity to protect residents from the health threats in our environment. The work of EHA includes the existing work of the food, hygiene, radiation and animal services programs. Emerging programs will include work to reduce hazards in the home and mitigate the health impacts of climate change. The full scope of EHA is being developed in active partnership with community groups and other city agencies. I made multiple changes in our administrative

leadership to help us reach an enhanced level of efficiency and effectiveness. Last year, I moved the Office of Health Equity into my central office to redirect its work toward ensuring that the programs and resources of the department are focused on eliminating health disparities and working with communities. This will strengthen our capacity to achieve outcomes for our residents that are both meaningful and equitable.

Finally, I have brought on two new leadership staff, the agency's first Chief Health Informatics Officer (CHIO) and first Chief Performance Officer (CPO). The CHIO will work to enhance the accessibility and interoperability of data, allowing for more advanced use and improved data sharing with the public and partners. The CPO will lead our quality improvement efforts to increase efficiency across the agency and identify high-impact goals that we can improve through our work. These efforts will both strengthen DC Health's capacity to work with Council and the public to recognize important health concerns and identify key initiatives to support through funding and partnerships.

DC Health is now better positioned to commit resources and apply creativity to our core mission: achieving concrete health improvements

for District residents. While the news has in recent weeks has left many uncertain about the future of public health, I'm incredibly proud of the successes of the DC Health team and our partners over the last year, and I offer these achievements as a model of how we intend to move forward.

I am pleased to announce that the cancer control team within our Community Health Administration has made significant improvement in the quality and timeliness of breast cancer care for residents who are seen in our community clinics. Our team noticed, in 2023, that women who got abnormal mammogram screening results were waiting far too long before engaging with providers to plan for their care. This delay stemmed from multiple factors, many of which were social needs or clinic processes that patients could not control. The team worked with providers to improve the screening process, expand and streamline referrals, provide practical resources to patients and standardize patient navigation. These efforts decreased the average follow-up time for abnormal mammogram screenings from 68 days in 2023 to 28 days in 2024. That is 40 fewer sleepless nights for patients waiting to hear if they have a cancer diagnosis, and less time for any potential cancers to grow unchecked.

Our new EHA, which works to eliminate health hazards, stood up a new bedding and upholstery program last fiscal year, protecting residents from bedbugs and other pests. This is a protection that is present in other states, but that DC has lacked until now. The new program registered over 2,000 businesses in FY24 to ensure that they met standards for storage and labeling of bedding and upholstery products. District consumers can trust, just as they do with the pools and restaurants we inspect, that DC Health will ensure that these products are safe for their use. In addition, I am excited to announce that within the next couple of months EHA will launch the Carbon Monoxide Prevention Program, which will provide education and carbon monoxide detectors to our most vulnerable populations: the elderly and families with children living in Wards 5, 7, and 8.

Another major success is the lowest annual total of new HIV cases since the 1990s announced by Mayor Bowser earlier this month which recognized the significant improvements that the agency has made in reducing the transmission of HIV. DC has seen an 85% drop in HIV cases over the last 15 years and our partnerships with community-based

organizations and clinical care providers have helped rapidly connect residents newly diagnosed with HIV to care - over 80% of them within 30 days. Due to these efforts, 88% of clients living with HIV in DC in 2023 achieved an undetectable viral load and therefore will not pass on HIV through sexual transmission.

In closing, I look forward to keeping Council, our partners, and the public informed as we continue making improvements to keep our residents safe and healthy. I thank the Council for providing DC Health with an opportunity to discuss our work over the past year and our vision for the future. I am available to answer your questions.