

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICES



**Fiscal Year 2025-2026  
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**

February 26, 2026  
9:30 am  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Good morning, Chairperson Bonds, members of the Committee, and staff. I am Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes, Director of the Department of Employment Services (DOES). Thank you for the opportunity to testify to DOES' performance during Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 and our progress to date in Fiscal Year 2026. For the past decade, under the leadership of Mayor Muriel Bowser, DOES continues to advance equitable workforce development, strengthen economic security, and ensure that every District resident has access to meaningful employment opportunities.

DOES serves as the District's lead labor and workforce development agency. Our mission is to connect residents to jobs, administer critical social insurance programs, and enforce labor laws that protect workers and employers alike. We administer Unemployment Insurance, Paid Family Leave, and Workers' Compensation; provide comprehensive employment services through our American Job Centers; and deliver innovative workforce and apprenticeships programs that prepare District residents, youth and adults alike, for future careers. This work has been guided by our clear vision of H.O.P.E. – Helping Others Persevere Equitably – serving as our roadmap for building an inclusive workforce system that connects residents to quality jobs, supports employers, and strengthens communities. I am honored to have led the agency through these efforts during the last ten years.

### **Workforce Development**

Over the past decade, more than 313,000 participants received staff-assisted career services from DOES, supported by nearly one million workforce interventions. Through trainings, career-counseling, paid work experience, and credentialing pathways aligned with in-demand industries, DOES helped residents take meaningful steps towards long-term stability and economic mobility. Through its **American Job Centers** (AJCs) in FY2025, DOES served nearly 32,000 unique participants, delivering over 77,000 career services. Across our locally- and federally-funded adult



workforce training programs, DOES consistently achieved over 50 percent of participants gaining unsubsidized employment, reinforcing our commitment to family-sustaining wages and opportunities.

DOES also administers high-quality training opportunities for in-demand local jobs. This involves targeted skills training in high-growth sectors, intensive support for those facing the greatest hurdles, and direct connections to employers who are hiring now. The **DC Infrastructure Academy (DCIA)** is part of this strategy, serving as a direct pipeline for the in-demand infrastructure jobs available in the District. Since its launch in 2018, DCIA has trained over 5,300 participants, with a 69 percent employment rate. In FY2025, the DCIA served over 400 participants of which 368 of them participated in occupational skills training. 82 percent of these participants successfully completed the training. This accomplishment not only earns them an industry-recognized credential but also equips them to enter a profession or trade, paving the way for sustainable economic advancement. DCIA continues to expand its Information Technology (IT), Commercial Driving License (CDL), and Energy training programs as it prepares for the opening of its new Spingarn campus in 2026.

The **Office of Talent and Client Services (OTCS)** serves as the District’s strategic bridge between employers and District talent, ensuring businesses can access the skilled workforce they need to grow and compete. By aligning employers with DOES resources and workforce programs, OTCS delivers coordinated solutions that strengthen businesses, advance economic mobility, and reinforce the District’s workforce infrastructure. In FY2025, OTCS registered 396 new employers and led more than 37 hiring events, expanding employment access to 2,070 District residents. In March 2025, OTCS partnered with the DC Department of Human Resources to host the “Gateway to District Careers Federal Hiring Event” in response to federal workforce reductions. This event



convened more than 60 District government agencies and private sector employers and highlighted job openings across administrative, technical, operational, and leadership roles. Beyond a single-day event, this cross-agency response streamlined talent matching, connected displaced federal professionals, and provided tailored transition resources to ensure sustained reintegration. DOES also worked with partners across DC government, including the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, and with regional counterparts, to launch [talentcapital.ai](#) — a regional talent marketplace to connect displaced workers, including former federal employees, with jobs and career services, using state of the art technology. Initiatives like this demonstrate DOES’ ability to mobilize partners quickly, retain high-value District talent within the regional economy, and deliver scalable workforce solutions during periods of economic transition.

DOES also provides vital on-ramps to employment for District residents with barriers to employment, including returning citizens. The **Division of State Initiatives (DSI) - Project Empowerment** has led the way in creating such opportunities. In FY2025, DSI served over 1,500 participants, with 1,225 completing comprehensive job readiness training and life skills training. Through a structured approach that includes dedicated case management, career coaching, and subsidized work experiences, the program creates clear pathways to permanent employment. As a result, 681 participants have secured short-term or long-term employment during FY2025.

Over the past year, DOES has driven transformative innovations that are reshaping workforce development in the District. In FY2026, we will build on this momentum by strategically investing federal and local funds to expand these high-impact initiatives. Our goal is not just to train individuals for jobs, but to build a career ecosystem that supports our key industries and creates lasting prosperity for our residents. A cornerstone of this strategy is our focus on



apprenticeships; a proven model for building skilled and dedicated talent. We are proud of our recent partnership with Amtrak, which is creating new pathways into skilled rail occupations, and in May 2025, we proudly launched the nation's first registered apprenticeship for AI Data Annotators, placing the District at the forefront of the region's expanding artificial intelligence footprint. Our commitment to innovation is reflected in our work to expand our apprenticeship portfolio. We are focused on growing beyond our current 319 sponsors and increasing our ranks to 6,573 registered apprentices. This includes funding 160 out-of-school youth focused pre-apprenticeship opportunities in FY2026, to ensure our young people have early access to these career-building pathways.

### **Aligning Workforce Needs with Education**

DOES recognizes the importance of connecting the District's youth with numerous early opportunities for positive development by offering an array of access points to career pathways, occupational skills trainings, building soft skills, and work experience. Last month, DOES opened applications for the upcoming 2026 **Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP)**. In FY2025, MBSYEP served nearly 13,000 youth (ages 14 to 24) at 729 employer sites, with 54 percent of participants residing in Wards 7 and 8. Over the past decade, DOES provided more than 126,000 opportunities for young people who gained first-hand work experiences through the program.

Additionally, DOES' **Career Ready Early Scholars Program (CRESP)** provides students ages nine to 13 with opportunities to engage in career exploration. Between 2024 and 2025, CRESP provided approximately 900 opportunities to young people expanding career exploration in healthcare, IT, science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and public safety. In FY2025, over 500 District youth completed the program, of which 60 percent resided in



Wards 7 and 8. In FY2026 we received nearly 3,000 applications in the first 48 hours of the application launch on January 26<sup>th</sup>.

In FY2025, the **Youth Apprenticeship Program** expanded host sites and introduced non-traditional pathways in healthcare and IT, ensuring broader access for District students. The Youth Apprenticeship Program also met its full enrollment goal of 60 participants in FY2025, with 88 percent earning nationally recognized certifications and/or transitioning into full time registered apprenticeship programs upon completion. Notably, our youth apprenticeship program with Howard University led to the direct entry of 22 graduating seniors from DC high schools into full-time apprenticeship careers as medical coders, telemedicine technicians, and customer service representatives. In FY2026, we continued this partnership with Howard University and expanded the program’s reach to include student representation across 21 DC public and charter high schools—nearly doubling the reach of last year’s cohort.

Recognizing that practical work experience is a critical catalyst for securing competitive roles in high-demand fields, DOES’ **Pathways to Public Service Apprenticeship Program** and **College Fellowship Program (CFP)** are designed for recent college graduates who are District residents. The Pathways to Public Service Program places bachelor-degree graduates from local and national colleges and universities into registered apprenticeship programs that combine full time employment, related technical instruction, on-the-job training, and engaging structured professional development opportunities that connect participants with an established working professional within numerous District agencies and more. In FY2025, the Pathways to Public Service Program placed 22 graduates in District agencies. The **College Fellowship Program** offers six-month positions aimed at gaining practical, hands-on experience aligned with participants’ career goals or fields of study. Launched in February 2025, the College Fellowship



Program is already showing strong early results, enrolling 49 fellows in FY2025 and FY2026. Nineteen fellows in FY2025 went on to secure full-time roles at various employers, including the Executive Office of the Mayor, Veterans on the Rise, the Greater Washington Urban League, Whitman Walker, and your own office, Councilmember Bonds – thank you for your continued support. All these programs are helping DOES to create a pipeline between the District’s education and employment systems.

### **Economic Security Programs**

This work is strengthened by the District’s commitment to worker protections, with DC consistently earning top national ranking. According to the 2025 “*Best States to Work*” Index by Oxfam America,<sup>1</sup> DC ranks highest nationally due to its strong wage policies and worker protection laws, including paid leave policies, unemployment support system, and strong anti-discrimination laws reflecting comparatively robust worker-oriented labor standards in the nation. Aside from DOES’ charge to create job opportunities for District residents, a core function of DOES is to provide the essential pillars of economic security that allow our workforce and economy to thrive. DOES delivers three major benefits programs that often have a significant and immediate impact on residents and their families. In FY2025, DOES’ **Office of Unemployment Insurance (UI)** saw a rise in UI claims from both former federal government employees and private sector workers. In FY2025, DOES adjudicated over 37,000 initial claims, compensating claimants for 423,063 weeks and paying over \$172 million in benefits, ensuring timely support for residents during periods of job loss. As part of our fiduciary duty to protect the integrity of the UI

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see the full report here: <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/press/best-states-to-work-2025-dc-california-top-the-list-while-north-carolina-mississippi-lag-far-behind/>.



Trust fund, the UI Tax Collections Unit secured \$128.5 million in collections, safeguarding the solvency of the UI Trust Fund.

Since the Office began administrating benefits in 2020, the Office of **Paid Family Leave (PFL)** has paid over \$498 million in benefits. In FY2025 alone, DOES adjudicated over 18,000 PFL claims, approving 90 percent and paying \$148.7 million in benefits, continuing to provide critical support for workers and families for bonding, caregiving, and medical needs.

DOES' **Office of Workers' Compensation (OWC)** conducts informal hearings in private sector workers' compensation matters. The program is fundamental to a stable business environment, providing a fair and efficient system that protects both employees who are injured on the job and the employers who are essential to our city's growth. In FY2025, the Office of Workers' Compensation approved 100 percent of settlements within 14 days, ensuring safety and health in the workplace.

DOES also administers and enforces the District's labor laws. The **Office of Wage and Hour (OWH)** manages compliance with the First Source Act, investigates wage and hour complaints, provides resources to domestic workers, and evaluates employer-employee safety and health in the workplace. In FY2025 and the first quarter of FY2026, OWH's Office of First Source Compliance (OFSC) delivered measurable results by executing 1,295 agreements, including 625 in construction and 670 non-construction agreements. The First Source Program also created 1,049 jobs, with 165 in construction and 884 in non-construction. First Source compliance efforts resulted in 552 of those jobs being filled by DC residents, or 52.6 percent of new hires. OWH also enhanced their strategic enforcement of wage theft by hosting its inaugural Wage Theft Awareness Conference. The Conference informed District employers and workers about the labor protections and strong wage laws that make the District of Columbia the best state to work. Further, OWH



increased collections of back wages in FY2025 and has averaged collections of back wages, damages, and penalties over \$500,000 in the past three fiscal years. DOES is fundamentally committed to protecting the District’s most vulnerable workers and providing them with the necessary resources and services.

## **Conclusion**

Chairperson Bonds and members of the Committee, DOES remains steadfast in its mission to connect residents to opportunity, strengthen economic security, and build a workforce that reflects the talent and diversity of our city. I am proud of the progress we have made in FY2025 and excited about the future we are shaping together. Thank you for your continued partnership and support. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

