



February 6, 2019

**Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
Performance Oversight Hearing:  
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Testimony of Paula Thompson  
Co-Chair, DC Reentry Action Network  
February 6, 2019  
Room 500, 9:30 am**

Good Morning Chairman Allen and fellow members of the Committee. My name is Paula Thompson and I am the Executive Director of Voices for a Second Chance, an OVSJG grantee whose mission it is to empower those currently and recently incarcerated. I am also the proud Co-Chair of the DC Reentry Action Network (DC RAN), along with my co-chair Chiquisha Robinson. I am here today to represent the 23 nonprofit members of RAN. Voices for a Second Chance helps to create stronger relationships between those incarcerated and their families and communities, as well as providing counseling and support while incarcerated to address challenges. In doing so, those who participate are better prepared to successfully transition back into the community and build better futures for themselves and their loved ones.

Thanks to the vision and leadership of Michelle Garcia, Director of OVSJG, along with the rest of her strong team, the RAN coalition was formed in 2017 and has worked since to build a community of reentry service providers for collective voice and impact. Because of OVSJG's support, reentry providers have united in this type of coalition for the first time, and we are excited to continue creating change together.



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Additionally, RAN is grateful that OVSJG has also granted continued funding for administrative support for RAN to the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). With OVSJG's funding and CCE's partnership, RAN has been able to expand its membership base, create one-pagers educating the public on the coalition and its mission, securing several training opportunities for 2019, and continue to advocate for improving reentry services in the District.

RAN connects effective, local, client-centered reentry service providers to exchange knowledge, strengthen services and give voice to a historically underserved population in our city—people returning home from incarceration. RAN has determined the priorities for returning citizens in our city to be access to quality and culturally competent mental health services, safe and affordable housing, coordination of care, and access to substance use disorder treatment. Thanks to OVSJG's ongoing support, RAN has become a collective voice of reentry service providers to communicate the needs of returning citizens and work closely with city agencies.

OVSJG also provided funds in FY19, which will be used towards professional development by members of RAN. This includes a comprehensive communications training that will provide RAN member organizations with the tools to better advocate for their clients and justice-involved District residents, while also teaching returning citizens clients how to more effectively tell their stories. Additionally, with the Council for Court Excellence's assistance, RAN won a competitive grant to provide training to member organization staff, plus staff from CSOSA and the DC Courts, in creating a trauma-informed justice system. This continued funding allows



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RAN members and their clients to continue having access to professional development opportunities and thus better advocate for the District's returning citizens.

I would like to thank you, Chairman Allen, and the Judiciary Committee for prioritizing reentry work and for recognizing the vital importance of OVSJG. The needs are immense. In this city, one in twenty-two adults are under some form of correctional control and one in seven adults have a criminal record. The RAN members work hard every day to provide quality services but the need is so much greater than just the 460 returning citizens that were supported through funding to nine grantees in FY17. While the FY18 numbers are not yet available, OVSJG has contracted with a researcher for a new report that will be shared when ready. Between 1,500 and 2,000 DC code offenders return to DC every year from Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) facilities alone and nearly 12,000 released from the Department of Corrections (DOC)<sup>1</sup>.

The OVSJG FY18 and some FY19 grantees participating in RAN include Collaborative Solutions for Communities; Community Connections, Inc; Community Family Life Services; Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop; House of Ruth; Jubilee Housing; Hillcrest Children and Family Center; Open City Advocates, National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, THRIVE DC, University Legal Services, and Voices for a Second Chance.

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<sup>1</sup> Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. (2015). *One-Day Count of Justice System Involved Individuals within the District of Columbia*.

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I would like to share some real success stories that the OVSJG funds have enabled. The impact on the lives of returning citizens has been tremendous.

When University Legal Services Jail and Prison Advocacy Project (ULS) Reentry Advocate Curtrice Scott first met Erik, he was due to be released from Hope Village in just a week. He told Curtrice he was a “homeless specialist” and didn’t think there was much she could do for him that he couldn’t do for himself. At 56, he had been chronically homeless prior to and in between incarcerations for 35 years. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, Erik usually refused to stay in a shelter, but he agreed to stay at a shelter after Curtrice arranged for a bed. Curtrice quickly obtained Medicaid, SNAP benefits and clothing, and connected Erik with a mental health provider and a primary care physician, one of his reentry priorities. Despite Curtrice’s best efforts, Erik was unable to get a PSH voucher even though he was at the top of the list based on vulnerability for many weeks. Curtrice found Erik a room in a group house run by Catholic Charities. Now a year later, Erik has been in the community without any new criminal justice involvement or problems with supervision. He still lives in the same group home, where he loves his independence and where he can live indefinitely. Erik loves tinkering with computers and spends time foraging for technology that others have discarded. Thanks to Curtrice’s patient and persistent advocacy and Erik’s resiliency, the “homeless specialist” no longer needs those particular skills and can focus on living instead of just surviving.

Soon after his release from prison, NM contacted Voices for a Second Chance. Mr. NM like most justice-involved individuals needed a birth certificate, identification and his social security

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card. He also needed supported services such as food, clothing and transportation. During his first visit to VSC, Mr. NM was able to obtain a check to receive his birth certificate and a referral for his identification. He also received clothing, food, transportation, and an appointment within 7 days to return to begin case management services.

During the case management intake Mr. NM disclosed he was homeless, an unemployed skilled laborer with a substance abuse disorder and gave to our case manager a slip of paper with the word HIV + written on it. The case manager immediately contacted our partnering organization to schedule him a medical appointment necessary to facilitate his prescriptions. She also completed the combined Medicaid application to ensure he had access to insurance coverage and food for nutritional support. She then contacted a medically supported housing agency and was able to facilitate his housing within 30 days of contact by providing the psychosocial assessment and police clearance. This housing facility provided Mr. NM with nutritional support, substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling. The VSC case manager worked in concert with the housing provider and facilitated his case management and employment search.

Today, Mr. NM maintains gainfully employed and has had independent housing and paid fair market rent for nearly 2 years. His home is fully furnished. He has his drivers licensed and has purchased a car. He continues to sustain his sobriety with the assistance of his sponsor and celebrates over 2 years clean time. He has successfully reunited with his children and family. Mr. NM continues to participate in supportive case management. He attends our supports when time allows.

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Daisy came to Thrive DC's Women in New Directions program (WIND) after having been released from BOP with a 10-year sentence. Daisy came to Thrive DC from a halfway house, she walked slumped over and avoided all eye contact. Daisy was very distrusting, under confident and was incredibly hard on herself. The only thing she was sure of was that she did not want to return to prison. She began in the WIND program following the Customer Service track. In eight weeks she was prepared to take her customer service certification. Daisy was very nervous about the test and kept saying, "I have never passed a test in my life" and "I know I will not pass this test." Everyone in the office encouraged Daisy and tried to build her confidence. Test day came and Daisy sat for her test. She was so nervous she was close to tears. But, she persevered and completed the exam. We were all awaiting her score with bated breath. We had all become very invested in Daisy's success. Finally, the scores were in and she passed! There was an office-wide cheer and Daisy was reduced to tears of joy. She sobbed, "This is the first time I have EVER passed anything. I did not think I could do it, but I did it." We were all in tears and so happy to witness Daisy's moment of triumph. She cried and laughed and eventually walked out of our office so much more confident, ebullient, and even taller than when she'd arrived. She looked me in the eye for the first time in two months and said, "Thank you." What she did not know was that the pleasure was all mine. We had watched her grow in spite of herself and then witnessed her realize her own potential. It was something to see! Daisy is employed now with a full-time job, making a living wage. She is out of custody and living in transitional housing. Daisy is on her way and Thrive DC is so proud to have been a part of her journey to success.



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We, as a city, need to recognize that in order to stop the cycle of violence and the creation of new victims, we must fully fund high-quality reentry services. By addressing their needs, we can prevent them from re-offending; we know firsthand from our years of experience at our nonprofits that re-entry work reduces crime. By working with returning citizens, we can reduce costs in policing, corrections, probation, and courts and most importantly, we can rebuild lives.

I look forward to continuing the conversation on reentry, and am available to answer any questions you may have. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

DC Reentry Action Network

Co-chair – Paula Thompson – Voices for a Second Chance

Co-chair – Chiquisha Robinson

Policy Committee Chair – Tammy Seltzer – ULS-DRDC

Community Engagement Committee Chair – Courtney Stewart – National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens

Program Committee Chair – Alicia Horton – Thrive DC

Membership and Governance Committee Chair – Caroline Cragin – Community Mediation DC

Returning Citizen Representative – Kevin Petty – Amazing Gospel Souls, INC

Amazing Gospel Souls, INC

Building Futures Program Community Services Agency

Changing Perceptions

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Collaborative Solutions for Communities  
Community Connections, Inc.  
Community Family Life Services  
Community Mediation DC  
DC Reentry Task Force  
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop  
Hillcrest Children and Family Center  
House of Ruth  
Jubilee Housing  
Lorton Art Program  
National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens  
Open City Advocates  
Project New Opportunity  
Southeast Ministries  
The Rock Christian Church Ministries  
Thrive DC  
ULS – Disability Rights DC  
United Methodist Women  
United Planning Organization  
Voices for a Second Chance