

December 6, 2018

Mayor Muriel Bowser
Office of the Mayor
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Rashad M. Young
Office of the City Administrator
John A Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 513,
Washington, DC 20004

Wayne Turnage
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 223
Washington DC 20004

Steve Walker
Mayor's Office of Talents and Appointments
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser, Mr. Young, Mr. Turnage, and Mr. Walker,

The DC Reentry Action Network (RAN), a coalition of DC non-profit organizations that strives to ensure that all justice-involved individuals people in D.C. have access to high quality reentry services to support their successful reintegration, and promotes community-based alternatives to end D.C.'s over-reliance on the criminal justice system, wishes to share its priorities regarding the appointment of a new director for the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) following the removal of Dr. Tanya Roster on Friday, November 30th. Because RAN serves and advocates for justice-involved people, who frequently struggle with mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders (SUDs), RAN is a stakeholder in the District's behavioral health offerings and thus asks to be included in the selection process for a new director of DBH.

RAN was founded in 2017 to create a collective voice for non-profit organizations that serve some of the District's most vulnerable residents: returning citizens. Every year, over 2,000 individuals are released from jail to Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)

supervision¹ and 1,753 individuals return to the District from the Bureau of Prison (BOP).² In FY 2017, CSOSA supervised over 16,000 people, with more than 6,100 of them entering supervision in that year alone.³ Returning citizens often struggle with mental health and SUDs. RAN members do their best to provide or connect clients to such services, but the District’s offerings are woefully inadequate, fueling the vicious cycle of arrest, institutionalization and incarceration, release, relapse, repeat. The District is in need of bold leadership to challenge the status quo.

RAN hopes that the new director will push for community-based services to undo that vicious cycle and stop the unnecessary institutionalization of DC residents with psychiatric disabilities. Earlier this year, the Office of the DC Auditor released a report documenting the failure of DBH to address the specific needs of people with psychiatric disabilities involved in the criminal justice system.⁴ Greater oversight is needed to avoid unnecessary, prolonged, and repeated incarcerations—often spent in solitary confinement—of DC residents struggling with psychiatric disabilities. The District is also currently facing a lawsuit from Disability Rights DC for failing to give children access to intensive community-based services that would prevent repeated institutionalization at psychiatric facilities.

RAN also hopes that the new director will take concrete efforts to stem the wave of drug overdoses plaguing the District.⁵ Jurisdictions across the country are experimenting with innovative ways to tackle drug overdoses, such as offering anti-addiction medication and treatment in emergency rooms⁶ and pairing needle exchanges with treatment.⁷ These effective strategies are focused on harm-reduction rather than abstinence, which is a more realistic approach that is, unfortunately, not encouraged in the District. The District even lacks a drop-in detox center and a “no wrong door” policy, which often leaves those who are ready to seek help hopping from place to place, diminishing the desire to seek help with every wrong door hit. The one door that is available to residents – the ARC – does not take into account the realities residents have to juggle, such as employment and childcare. The District is facing a public health crisis and RAN hopes

¹ Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia, *FY 2019 Budget Request: Summary Statement and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*, 1, 2 (February 12, 2018) available at <https://www.csosa.gov/about/financial/budget/2019/CSOSA-FY2019-CBJ%20Summary-Statement-FAQs.pdf>.

² Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, *One Day Estimate of Justice System-Involved Individuals within the District of Columbia (2017)*, (2017), available at <https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/publication/attachments/One%20Day%20Count%20Justice%20Involved%20%202017%20Infographic.pdf>

³ Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia, *FY 2019 Budget Request: Summary Statement and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*, 1, 2 (February 12, 2018) available at <https://www.csosa.gov/about/financial/budget/2019/CSOSA-FY2019-CBJ%20Summary-Statement-FAQs.pdf>.

⁴ Benjamin Moser et al., *Improving Mental Health Services and Outcomes for All: The D.C. Department of Behavioral Health and the Justice System*, Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (2018), <http://dcauditor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DBH.Report.2.26.18.pdf>.

⁵ See, e.g., Clarence Williams, *Dozens in D.C. taken to hospitals in new spike of suspected synthetic marijuana overdoses*, Washington Post (Sept. 13, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/dozens-in-dc-taken-to-hospitals-in-new-spike-of-suspected-synthetic-marijuana-overdoses/2018/09/13/907e1cfc-b79a-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0219100c4bec.

⁶ Christine Vestal, *Facing an overdose epidemic, some ERs now offer addiction treatment*, Washington Post (Oct. 28, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/facing-an-overdose-epidemic-some-ers-now-offer-addiction-treatment/2018/10/26/1829df84-c73f-11e8-9b1c-a90f1daae309_story.html?utm_term=.6f86398eb31e.

⁷ German Lopez, *A Vermont needle exchange isn’t just giving out syringes. It’s offering treatment on the spot*, Vox (Nov. 20, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/11/20/18096123/opioid-epidemic-vermont-needle-exchange-buprenorphine>.

that the new director of DBH is familiar with innovative ways to address the crisis head-on in a manner that is person- and harm-reduction-centered.

Additionally, the new director must address funding to incentivize evidence-based mental health providers to remain in the District. At a DC Council oversight hearing in 2016, several advocates noted mid-year restrictions DBH imposed on the use of local dollars for providers to assist people with mental illness in preparing to leave St. Elizabeths Hospital and the DC Jail who were not yet eligible for Medicaid.⁸ Mental health providers also experienced delays in receiving reimbursements for services already rendered, placing some in such precarious financial situations they turned away people requesting services. For providers like Green Door, which had been operating in the District for over 40 years, the local dollar issue contributed to the closing of their doors permanently and abruptly. Many Green Door consumers only found out about the closure when they showed up for appointments and found more doors closed on them. DBH provided inadequate outreach and support to consumers during the transition process. As part of retaining quality mental health providers, the new director must also be familiar with data tracking and measuring outcomes. Basic information regarding the number of current SUD providers and their outcomes is not available. The new director must find ways to attract, retain, and hold to high standards quality mental health providers.

The input provided in this letter encompasses only some of the ideas that RAN wishes to share with you to assist in your search for a new director of DBH. As direct service providers, RAN members know firsthand the challenges and opportunities faced by District residents in the behavioral health space. On November 13, 2018, RAN members had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Royster and share some of our concerns. We welcome the opportunity for future dialogue and hope to be a part of the selection process for new leadership.

Sincerely,

DC Reentry Action Network

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

Co-chair – Tara Libert – Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop

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

⁸ Benjamin Moser et al., *Improving Mental Health Services and Outcomes for All: The D.C. Department of Behavioral Health and the Justice System*, Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (2018), <http://dcauditor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DBH.Report.2.26.18.pdf>.

Amazing Gospel Souls, INC
Building Futures Program Community Services Agency
Changing Perceptions
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
Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia
Southeast Ministries
The Rock Christian Church Ministries
Thrive DC
ULS – Disability Rights DC
United Methodist Women
United Planning Organization
Voices for a Second Chance