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Amazing Gospel Souls, INC.

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May 7, 2020

ReOpen DC Taskforce: Committee on Government Operations, Public Safety, and Criminal Justice

Dear Co-Chairpersons Donahue, Racine, May, and Bobb, and members of the Committee:

The D.C. Reentry Action Network (RAN) is a coalition of 23 community-based organizations that provide reentry services to people coming home to the District from prison and jail. RAN member organizations have provided rapid-response services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including supply drives for people in halfway houses, identifying housing for the people kicked out of Hope Village who are not yet eligible for home confinement, and massively increasing wrap-around services for returning citizens who have lost their jobs or are quarantined. As we plan together for the new normal, RAN has identified five major areas of need that you can help address.

1) Make Emergency Funding Available to Community-Based Reentry Service Providers in FY20

RAN member organizations have faced major unexpected expenses due to COVID-19. For example, we have:

- purchased new technology and trained both staff and clients on its use;
- obtained Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for staff and clients;
- collected and bought basic supplies, including food, clothing, toiletries, and cleaning equipment for clients;
- given ride-share gift cards to vulnerable clients who would otherwise take Metro; and
- staffed responses to all manner of client emergencies related to the pandemic, including connection to care for people experiencing mental health crises, support for caregivers at home with children, and assistance filing for unemployment benefits.

Two RAN member organizations each estimated that they will need to spend an additional \$160,000 beyond their budgets on pandemic response. Many RAN member organizations applied for D.C.'s Small Business Recovery Microgrant, and some applied for federal aid, but the criminal record restrictions tied to the Paycheck Protection Program made others ineligible. These limited pots of money are simply not enough to sustain our rapid-response efforts.

Community-based organizations are an integral part of the support network ensuring that people returning to the District from prison and jail are safely reintegrated. **Therefore, we ask that the District designate \$1.1 million of its emergency funding to offer general operating support to non-profit organizations serving clients directly impacted by COVID-19.**

2) Amend D.C.'s Criminal Record Sealing and Expungement Laws

More than 80,000 unemployment compensation claims have been filed in D.C. since mid-March. Many clients of RAN member organizations have lost their jobs and others, more recently released, never even had the chance to interview before the shut-down orders went into effect. When businesses finally begin to rehire, we know that people with criminal records in D.C., 80 percent of whom are Black, will be at the back of the line; in one nationwide survey, 73 percent of employers responded that even a nonviolent misdemeanor conviction would be “somewhat” or “very influential” in their decision not to extend a job offer.

Despite our Ban the Box law, many returning citizens still struggle to find employment because their criminal history is readily publicly available. The only way to change this is to reform D.C.'s criminal record sealing and expungement law. The one in seven adult residents who have a criminal record should not be subject to even greater economic injury because of the public health emergency. **Therefore, RAN asks that the D.C. Council mark-up pending criminal record sealing and expungement bills by July 15 and pass legislation by September 15, and that Mayor Bowser sign the resulting act into law.**

3) Prioritize Opening a New Halfway House for Men in the District

Hope Village, the only halfway house for men in D.C., permanently closed its doors on April 30. The 220 men who resided there in March have all either been released, moved to home confinement, or transferred to a different halfway house in Baltimore, Maryland.

Home confinement is a welcome next step toward freedom for many D.C. Code offenders, and the mass movement of people out of the Hope Village shows that it can be done quickly, safely, and without landline telephone connections. But, for others, home confinement creates enormous burdens on their families, including potential exposure to COVID-19, and another person to feed and house. Others have no family support at all and have been left behind. D.C.'s returning citizens need both home confinement and halfway house options available to them inside the District to maximize their ability to secure a job or other income, find stable housing, engage with physical and behavioral healthcare, and reconnect with loved ones.

The District should encourage the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to make its final contract award for a new men's halfway house in the District as quickly as possible. Then, the District should support the new halfway house contractor in opening the doors of the new facility as quickly as possible – prioritizing its permit consideration at the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs and fast tracking any other necessary District government approvals.

4) Fund a Reentry Housing Pilot in FY21

The pandemic has only made D.C.'s housing crisis worse and the need for reentry housing more urgent. In addition to the short term-housing necessary for people transferring to home confinement during the pandemic, the District needs more transitional reentry beds for all people releasing from prison and jail. Fifty percent of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) reentry grantee clients are without safe, stable housing when they enter jail and prison. Grantees that serve especially vulnerable populations, such as returning citizens with serious mental illness, report homelessness rates as high as 95 percent. These clients are exiting the criminal legal system the same way they entered it – homeless and lacking the basic supports to help sustain them in our community. **That is why RAN is requesting that the District allocate \$1.8 million to OVSJG in FY21 to fund the first year of a three-year, 50-bed, men's reentry housing pilot.**

5) Increase FY21 Funding for Community-Based Reentry Service Providers

We work hard every day to provide quality reentry services, but the need is so much greater than what the 14 RAN members funded through OVSJG can provide, and grows every day the public health emergency lasts. Up to 2,000 D.C. Code offenders are typically released from the BOP in a year, and another 12,000 people from Department of Corrections custody; we expect the numbers to be even higher this year in light of the decarceration efforts in response to COVID-19. More funding is needed.

That is why RAN recommends that the District allocate an additional \$400,000 to OVSJG in FY21 for community-based reentry services. This modest increase is critical to provide organizations the resources they need to respond to the pandemic's fallout.

RAN is heartened by the District's actions to decarcerate during this public health crisis and its advocacy on the home confinement issue as Hope Village closed. We hope that you will consider these requests to continue supporting our returning citizen neighbors throughout the District's pandemic recovery phase.

Sincerely,

D.C. Reentry Action Network

Amazing Gospel Souls, Inc.
Building Futures Program of the
Community Services Agency
Changing Perceptions
Collaborative Solutions for
Communities
Community Connections, Inc.

Community Family Life Services
Community Mediation DC
Criminon New Life DC
DC Project Connect
Free Minds Book Club & Writing
Workshop
Hillcrest Children and Family Center

House of Ruth
Jubilee Housing
Legal Aid DC
National Reentry Network for
Returning Citizens
Open City Advocates
Project New Opportunity
SOME, Inc.
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The Rock Christian Church Ministries
Thrive DC
ULS -Disability Rights DC
Voices for a Second Chance