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Testimony of the Council for Court Excellence

Before the Committee on Youth Affairs

Council of the District of Columbia

**Performance Oversight Hearing for the
Department of Corrections**

February 4, 2026

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to present testimony. My name is Tracy Velázquez, and I am the Policy Director at the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization which conducts research, educates, and advocates to make D.C.'s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community. For over 40 years CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis, convening diverse stakeholders, and creating educational resources for the public. Please note that, in accordance with our policy, no judicial members of CCE participated in the formulation or approval of this testimony. This testimony does not reflect the specific views of, or endorsement by, any judicial member of CCE.

My testimony today concerns the need to replace the D.C. jail, why Council should require a Community Advisory Board in future jail planning, and issues related to the Central Cell Block (CCB).

Need for a New D.C. Jail. As the ODCA audit *Urgent Need for a New DC Jail*, clearly described, the D.C. jail has multiple and serious conditions problems; these are particularly critical in the fifty-year-old Central Detention Facility (CDF), which is in constantly in need of repairs in both common areas and individual cells.ⁱ The audit highlighted issues such as persistent presence of pest and mold, constant plumbing issues, and poor design that regularly renders portions of the jail unusable and create unsafe living conditions for residents and staff alike.

With over 2,100 peopleⁱⁱ spending on average over 270 daysⁱⁱⁱ in the D.C. jail, the need to improve the living and working environment cannot be overstated. We, the Auditor, and many others have long recommended that the District prioritize the replacement of the CDF, which houses 1,300 people; it is unclear where the plans for this facility stand.

As the nation's capital, the District has a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to lead the country in reimagining what a modern, humane, and safe jail facility can be. The new facility should move away from outdated designs that contribute to violence and harm and are not designed to provide services that help people reintegrate into D.C. on release, and instead incorporate evidence-based principles that promote

safety, wellness and rehabilitation. This includes smaller, well-supervised housing units with improved sightlines; natural light and ventilation; climate-controlled environments; durable materials that reduce maintenance and weaponization risks; and spaces designed to support programming, education, behavioral health treatment, and reentry preparation.

Unfortunately, CCE staff learned by attending a series of community meetings over the last fiscal year that new jail plans did not sufficiently meet these standards. For example, DOC shared that the design did not allow residents to access the outdoors; DOC tried to diminish the seriousness of this deficiency by saying that new facility would have fresh air and natural light. Notably, access to the outdoors during recreation times was a key concern highlighted by current jail residents in the Corrections Information Council's most recent inspection of DOC.^{iv} DOC also said that there would be only one kitchen for the entire jail complex – which likely would include three different buildings during the jail construction; both the Audit and CIC reports have shown that a one-kitchen model has been inadequate to ensuring the food arrives at the appropriate temperature. Additionally, no information was shared about cell or unit size; the number of cells that would be used for segregation; the size of medical facilities or the visitation area; or the size and features of programming space. And no community meetings have been held since May 2025.

Based on this lack of any recent communication about or meaningful community input into the new jail planning, we have recommended the creation of a ***Community Advisory Board (CAB)***. CABs are a best practice of the National Institute of Corrections in jail planning, and provide a wide array of participants, such as justice-impacted individuals, community advocates, agency leaders, and elected officials such as yourselves, with the opportunity to provide meaningful perspective and input into the design, construction, and oversight of correctional facilities.^v A well-structured CAB can ensure community transparency in jail planning by keeping public the meeting agendas and minutes; encouraging open dialogue through community listening sessions; and holding DOC and those working with the agency accountable through timely and informed feedback. CABs have been successfully implemented around the country, including in New York City,^{vi} Oklahoma City,^{vii} and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.^{viii} In response to questions from the Council staff to the Department of General Services in late 2025 that were shared with CCE, DOC continues to have no intent to create a CAB.

We hope that in their testimony, DOC will explain why they are unwilling to create a CAB for the new jail facility. If the Department refuses to implement a CAB, we ask Council through legislation to mandate one. If the District moves forward with a privately-financed jail, we would ask that Council insist that a CAB be a requirement of any RFP and included in the final contract.^{ix}

Finally, CCE would like to express that while we are committed to the replacement of CDF with a new facility, we also are committed to it being the best facility possible. We currently have no confidence that this will occur under the current administration. Unless we have signs that DOC is more responsive to the concerns of those directly impacted and committed to a facility that has an outdoor area for those being held and incorporates best practices not just in the U.S. but from around the world, we ask that the D.C. Council refuse to approve any contracts or funding until a new administration is in place.

CCB Conditions, lack of Grievance Process and Renovations.

I'd like to turn now to DOC's Central Cell Block (CCB), which is where people who are arrested are detained until they are either released – "no papered" – or have their first court appearance.

Often this facility gets short shrift, as people are usually there for 48 hours or less and likely are focused on dealing with the arrest itself. Also, unlike at the jail, there is no grievance procedure at CCB; if one were implemented, it could facilitate timely information on problems people experienced there.

I and others at CCE have attended meetings where individuals that have been detained at CCB spoke about issues there, including inadequately functioning HVAC, rodent and insect infestations, and a general disregard for sanitation and hygiene. Specifically, individuals who had been held at CCB mentioned that it would get incredibly hot in the summer, and the floor was often covered in urine and feces. Recent inspections indicate that at least some of these issues persist.

In their July and March 2025 inspections, the Corrections Information Council (CIC) found multiple issues with the conditions in CCB. These issues include toilet plumbing issues, cleanliness concerns, and inoperable cells. In one instance, the fire department was called in to pry open an inoperable door on a cell someone was trapped in.^x This is a major safety concern and could have been life threatening had there been an emergency situation. Furthermore, the wheelchair lifts were broken for over a year and repairs were never completed due to the planned temporary relocation of CCB, which is not slated to occur until May 2026.^{xi} We hope DOC will provide an update on addressing conditions issues, particularly those which impact safety and accessibility. We hope this committee will ask DOC what if anything would prevent the agency from having a grievance process for those held at CCB; if DOC says it will not implement a grievance process voluntarily, we hope this Committee will introduce legislation to mandate one.

We encourage the Committee also to ask DOC for an update on the CCB renovations in their performance testimony. There has been little public attention to this, even though the D.C. capital budget contains \$20 million for the project. Those in CCB are scheduled to be relocated to a temporary location this year, and it is unclear whether this will actually happen, and when renovations on the permanent facility will be completed.

In closing, we appreciate the Council's ongoing robust oversight of DOC, which we believe is critical for their addressing the serious issues that have been raised and ensuring that the CDF is replaced by the most humane and rehabilitative as possible. Thank you.

ⁱ Kathleen Patterson, "Urgent Need for a New D.C. Jail," Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, May 28, 2025, <https://dcauditor.org/report/dc-jail-report-update-report-5-28-25/>.

ⁱⁱ CCE calculation of ADP for the week ending D.C. Department of Corrections January 20, 2026. "DC Department of Corrections (DOC) Daily Population Report," DOC Official Population Counts by Facility, <https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/The%20Daily%20Population%20Report%20from%20%20January%2010th%20through%20January%2016th%202026.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ D.C. Department of Corrections, "DC Department of Corrections Facts and Figures April 2025," April 2025, <https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/DC%20Department%20of%20Corrections%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20April%202025.pdf>.

^{iv} District of Columbia Corrections Information Council, "Department of Corrections Central Detention Facility, Correctional Treatment Facility, and Central Cell Block Report on Findings and Recommendation," November 17, 2025, https://cic.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cic/page_content/attachments/DOC%20CDF%20CTF%20CCB%20FY25Q4.pdf.

^v National Institute of Corrections, "Jail Planning and Expansion: Local Officials and Their Roles," U.S. Department of Justice, January 2010, <https://www.njc.org/pdfs/DOJTribalCorrections/PONIConferenceMaterials/JailPlanningandExpansionLocalOfficialsandTheirRoles.pdf>.

^{vi} City of New York, “BBJ Brooklyn BK FAC Community Advisory Board Meeting #1 – 5/30/24,” May 30, 2024, <https://rikers.cityofnewyork.us/documents/bbj-brooklyn-bk-fac-community-advisory-board-meeting-1-5-30-24/>.

^{vii} Chamber Staff, “Milestones in Motion: Oklahoma County’s new jail project stays on course with public oversight board,” *Velocity*, August 17th, 2023, <https://www.velocityokc.com/blog/inside-okc/milestones-in-motion-oklahoma-county-s-new-jail-project-stays-on-course-with-public-oversight-board/>.

^{viii} Lancaster County Correctional Facility, “Project Team,” Lancaster County, accessed January 23, 2026, <https://lccf-pa.com/advisory-committee/>.

^{ix} District Task Force on Jails and Justice, “District Task Force on Jails and Justice Statement on Need for a Community Advisory Board for New Jail Facility,” *Council for Court Excellence*, August 22, 2025, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659c0df344c9c8325dd821ca/68a7850d56db5f4b22b2bcf1_Task%20Force%20Community%20Advisory%20Board%20Statement.pdf.

^x District of Columbia Corrections Information Council, “Department of Corrections, Central Detention Facility, Correctional Treatment Facility, and Central Cell Block Report on Findings and Recommendations” November 17, 2025,

https://cic.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cic/page_content/attachments/DOC%20CDF%20CTF%20CCB%20FY25Q4.pdf.

^{xi} District of Columbia Corrections Information Council, “Department of Corrections, Central Detention Facility, Correctional Treatment Facility, and Central Cell Block Report on Findings and Recommendations” November 17, 2025,

https://cic.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cic/page_content/attachments/DOC%20CDF%20CTF%20CCB%20FY25Q4.pdf.