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**Testimony of the Council for Court Excellence
Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
of the Council of the District of Columbia**

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

May 6, 2026

Thank you, Chairperson Pinto, for the opportunity to testify at today’s Budget Oversight Hearing on the Department of Corrections (DOC). My name is Misty Thomas Zaleski, and I am providing this testimony in my capacity as Executive Director of the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with the mission to bring people together to conduct research, educate, and advocate 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 member 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 proposed capital budget for the Department of Corrections, focusing on proposed plans to renovate and replace the D.C. jail and the related need for a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to inform any future planning and construction investments. Unfortunately, the Mayor’s FY27 proposed capital budget does not provide sufficient clarity for the community, nor this Council, on how or when a direly-needed new jail annex will be built. It is also unclear how a theoretic public-private partnership model will meet the needs or the values of the District. With our current jail turning 50 years old this year, a new facility is profoundly overdue and this administration has continued to kick this can down the road, at the perilous expense of its DOC employees and the incarcerated people who live in the jail.

As you know, CCE conducted an audit of D.C. jail on behalf of the Office of the D.C. Auditor. We looked at conditions in the Central Detention Facility (CDF) and Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF) from July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2024 utilizing official inspection and incident reports and an array of other sources with first-hand knowledge. The report, entitled *Urgent Need for a New DC Jail*, was published last May and reflects the pressing and ongoing need to remedy poor conditions in the jail and to build a new facility so that people can be moved out of the dilapidated CDF as soon as feasibly possible.¹

While the audit provided us with deep knowledge of the jail, CCE also has closely monitored conditions inside the jail and efforts to replace it for many years.

This work has included our facilitation of the District Task Force on Jails & Justice, an independent advisory body established in 2019 dedicated to redefining the District’s approach to incarceration; the Task Force – which includes D.C. government leaders as well as community advocates and directly impacted people – all unanimously agreed that D.C. needed a new jail. They also developed recommendations for reducing the jail population, as well as what characteristics are necessary in a new facility to meet the health, safety and reentry needs of jail residents.ⁱⁱ

As a reminder, there was \$477 million in the FY2025 capital budget for CDF’s replacement, until funding was yanked from the capital plan last year as the District prioritized an investment in a football stadium over the jail residents and staff, who must continue to live and work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions.ⁱⁱⁱ Since the end of May 2025, when the Mayor announced the District will seek private financing to construct a publicly operated D.C. jail at her budget press conference, the public has been left in the dark on District leadership’s plans to replace the 50-year-old Central Detention Facility. While DOC leaders told Council it would issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) followed by a Request for Proposals (RFP) concerning replacing the jail this year, no solicitations have been issued. Meanwhile, there have been only modest maintenance efforts to improve the living conditions of the over 2,200 people^{iv} who are residing in our jail for an average length of stay of 257 days.^v

We hope, Councilmember Pinto and other members of the Council, that you will demand clarity on the plans for CDF’s replacement; here are a few areas we believe need to be examined:

- The “Milestones” section of the DOC budget page lists a construction start date of December 2026, which seems unfeasible given no RFQ or RFP have been issued. You and the public should know whether the Administration has already been in contact with possible bidders, and if so, who they are and what those conversations entailed.
- This year’s proposed capital budget includes \$75,000,000 in FY2032 “pay as you go” funds for the new facility. How does this number comport with the start of construction milestone of December 2026? You and the public should know if that capital budget commitment reflects an anticipated completion date – or perhaps, worryingly, the Mayor’s revised plans for when construction might start – and whether the contractor will receive any payments prior to completion.
- Looking at this current FY27 proposed capital budget investment, there is no additional funding for design of a new jail facility.^{vi} The Task Force and other community leaders have expressed dismay that the most recent plans shared with the community show that only a single kitchen is planned to serve the entire facility and there is no outside area for resident recreation, which we believe is inhumane and possibly unconstitutional. And there has been no information publicly shared about other important details, including size of cells, details about program space, or capabilities of the medical and mental health facilities planned. You and the public should know whether this means no further design changes will be considered, or if future design changes could be made by the private contractor. In fact, the “New Correctional Facility for CDF” page of the capital budget indicates the Progress Assessment for the new jail is ‘Pre-design;’ we hope you will ask what control, if any, D.C. will have over the final building design.^{vii}

Given the jail is in urgent need of replacement, and that any new facility built will be expected to last for decades, it is crucial that Council and DOC ensure that moving forward, there is increased transparency and meaningful participation from the community in planning efforts.

One good way to address this need would be to create and fund, starting in FY27, a Community Advisory Board (CAB), which is a best practice of the National Institute of Corrections in jail planning.^{viii} CABs 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.^{ix} A well-structured CAB can ensure community transparency in jail planning by keeping public 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. Budgetarily, funding for this could be included as a line item in DOC's FY27 budget and could be a requirement for contractors in any RFP issued, requiring them to absorb the cost once the contract is in place.

As always, CCE would be happy to work with the Council to ensure that any money for a new jail – whether through public or private funding – is spent to create a facility that is safe, humane, and rehabilitative for those who, as a result of the policies of this Council, are held there. 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 Council for Court Excellence, “District Task Force on Jails and Justice,” accessed January 22, 2026, <https://www.courtexcellence.org/featured-reports/task-force>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See “FY 2027 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, VOLUME 5 - FY 2027 - 2032 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS PLAN,” *Government of the District of Columbia, Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser*, April 14, 2026, p. 211, <https://app.box.com/s/3mw1neeolc1yopnpi7n5vhvn1s4j7eq>.

^{iv} D.C. Department of Corrections, “DC Department of Corrections (DOC) Daily Population Report,” April 24, 2026, DOC Official Population Counts by Facility, <https://doc.dc.gov/node/307122>.

^v District of Columbia Department of Corrections. Facts and Figures: January 2026. Washington, DC: District of Columbia Department of Corrections, 2026
<https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/DC%20Department%20of%20Corrections%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20January%202026%20updated.pdf>.

^{vi} See “FY 2027 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, VOLUME 5 - FY 2027 - 2032 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS PLAN,” *Government of the District of Columbia, Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser*, April 14, 2026, p. 208, <https://app.box.com/s/3mw1neeolc1yopnpi7n5vhvn1s4j7eq>.

^{vii} See “FY 2027 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, VOLUME 5 - FY 2027 - 2032 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS PLAN,” *Government of the District of Columbia, Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser*, April 14, 2026, p. 211, <https://app.box.com/s/3mw1neeolc1yopnpi7n5vhvn1s4j7eq>.

^{viii} National Institute of Corrections, “Jail Planning and Expansion: Local Officials and Their Roles,” U.S. Department of Justice, January 2010, <https://www.nijc.org/pdfs/DOJTribalCorrections/PONIConferenceMaterials/JailPlanningandExpansionLocalOfficialsan dTheirRoles.pdf>.

^{ix} National Institute of Corrections, “Jail Planning and Expansion: Local Officials and Their Roles,” U.S. Department of Justice, January 2010, <https://www.nijc.org/pdfs/DOJTribalCorrections/PONIConferenceMaterials/JailPlanningandExpansionLocalOfficialsan dTheirRoles.pdf>.