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**Testimony of the Council for Court Excellence  
Before the Committee on Youth Affairs  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing for the  
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

*May 7, 2026*

Thank you, Chairperson Parker and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to present testimony. My name is Magdalena Tsiongas, and I am the Policy Manager 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 proposed budget for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), with a focus on fulling funding the independent oversight portion of the Recidivism Reduction at DYRS Amendment Act of 2024 (previously the ROAD Act) and our concerns about proposed funding for an expanded number of beds at both New Beginnings and the Youth Services Center (YSC).

***Independent Oversight***

We remain steadfast in the belief that DYRS must have independent oversight, to ensure accountability and better protect incarcerated youth. This permanent oversight was codified in the Recidivism Reduction Act but remains unfunded, resulting in the elimination of the Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight (OIJJFO) with no agency taking up its role as an independent watchdog. The OIJJFO provided

valuable oversight since 2021, including maintaining publicly available data dashboards on population data at DYRS facilities and reports, such as their recent reports detailing serious concerns with the fire safety systems and mental health care at the juvenile justice facilities.<sup>i</sup> Independent oversight allows for unbiased independent investigation into incidents, such as alleged staff on youth physical and sexual violence; ongoing lawsuits against DYRS point to possible harms to our youth and exposure on the part of the D.C. government to expensive settlements.<sup>ii</sup>

As passed, the Recidivism Reduction Act provides for permanent oversight of DYRS under the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA). However, since the law's passage in 2025, this provision has yet to be funded. The estimated funding at bill passage was \$5.8 million over 4 years (\$710,000 in costs in FY25, roughly \$1.7 million in FY26 which have yet to be funded, and approximately \$1.7 million in FY27 and FY28). This funding would allow for the hiring of four employees to inspect juvenile justice facilities and complete compliance reviews, an expansion of the previous OIJFO office.

We understand the added complication of where to locate this oversight body remains, given that ODCA is not inclined to house this independent oversight permanently. We ask this Committee to continue having conversations about where to house this oversight, including exploring the possibility of expanding the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children (OFC) to include not just oversight of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), but also DYRS.

### ***Capital Budget***

Of great concern to us in the Mayor's proposed capital budget for DYRS is the proposed additional \$46 million over the next four years (\$4 million in FY27) to construct 10 additional beds at YSC and 30 additional beds at New Beginnings.<sup>iii</sup> The Mayor's justification for expanded beds is unclear, but we do recognize that YSC has dealt with overcrowding over the past few years. The issue of committed youth awaiting relevant and appropriate placements spending long periods of time - often months - at YSC before being placed, is one we explored in our October 2025 report, *Committed Youth Awaiting Placement in the D.C. Youth Services Center*, and have presented to this Committee on in various other hearings.

The focus of this Committee, and the Agency, should remain on decreasing the wait times for committed youth at YSC, as delays have contributed to unacceptable overcrowding at YSC. Expanding the number of beds at YSC is not a solution to the underlying problem of overcrowding, and instead could potentially create a lack of urgency in shortening wait times.

When fully enacted, the Recidivism Reduction Act includes a provision that should help to address one cause of these delays - that is, the need to develop individualized rehabilitation plans before dispositional hearings, implement them upon placement, and update them regularly. These plans must assess risk factors, protective factors, and specific needs to reduce recidivism, with a predisposition meeting ensuring input from the youth, their family, attorneys, and relevant agencies. Additionally, the legislation mandates that DYRS begin developing a discharge and reentry plan within 60 days of placement. We also recognize that prior to their Oversight Hearing in February, DYRS was able to decrease the overall population at YSC to around 75 youth. However, since that hearing, there has been a sharp increase in the number of youth held, with 98 youth at YSC as of May 1st. We recommend this Committee ask DYRS leadership what strategies they employed to lower the YSC population earlier this year, so emphasis can continue to be placed on moving young people swiftly through YSC, which is intended to be a short-term facility, rather than turning to expanding the number of beds.

Turning to New Beginnings, this facility has not seen the same levels of overcrowding as YSC, and yet this budget proposes a 50% increase in beds. We hope this Committee will explain the rationale behind this increase; for example, there have been over 20 Title 16 youth held at one time at YSC on several occasions this year;<sup>iv</sup> when they turn 18, they are sent to the D.C. Jail. Certainly, if DYRS were to say that this space would allow for youth being charged as adults by the US Attorney's Office to remain in the juvenile system until age 21, we would look at this increase differently than if it were just to make it easier for youth to be incarcerated rather than improve the systems that can help them stay out of the justice system in the first place.

To emphasize the detrimental impact of potentially incarcerating more children for longer at YSC or New Beginnings, we want to highlight what the District's own data has shown regarding system involvement. The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) has reported on the two-year recidivism rates for system involved young people. Those who have been committed to DYRS have significantly higher recidivism rates than young people who were only on probation or went through a diversion program. The 2025 OIJFO report, *Behavioral Health Services at the New Beginnings*

*Youth Development Center*, underlines this point that youth at New Beginnings “revert to delinquent behavior and return to DYRS custody, or, in some cases, face charges as adults.” They found that while New Beginnings is intended to be a therapeutic program, in practice, it functioned more as a secure facility where youth were often merely supervised by staff rather than engaged programmatically.<sup>v</sup>

We appreciate Councilmember Parker’s continued commitment to improving the educational and therapeutic treatment for youth incarcerated in YSC and New Beginnings, as system-involved youth should be in a therapeutic environment. We ask this committee to look to invest in therapeutic programming in the community and continue to push for youth who are system involved to be held in the least restrictive environment possible.

We know that providing youth with opportunities to engage in activities that promote positive youth development are key to reducing their contact with the justice system and the need for beds at YSC or New Beginnings (an idea support by Thrive Under 25 (TU25) coalition, of which CCE is a member). At the recent Roundtable in front of this committee on youth recreational alternatives, we heard young people ask for investment in 24-hour safe spaces in the community (as well as expanded access to recreational and mental health services). Rec center closures and lack of access to community sports fields because of funding difficulties were cited as having a detrimental impact on youth. We ask the Committee to consider the asks of youth from this Roundtable and that have been raised in other hearings, to center what investments will have the most positive impact on young people, over more investment in carceral solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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<sup>i</sup> Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight, “Behavioral Health Services at New Beginnings,” October 27, 2025, <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oijjfo/publication/attachments/Behavioral%20Health%20Services%20at%20New%20Beginnings%20Final%20Report%20October%2027%2C%202025.pdf>; Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight, “Inspection, Testing, and Maintenance of Fire and Life Safety Systems at the YSC and NB,” March 31, 2025, <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oijjfo/publication/attachments/Inspection%2C%20Testing%2C%20and%20Maintenance%20of%20Fire%20and%20Life%20Safety%20Systems%20at%20the%20YSC%20and%20NB%203.31.25.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> J.D. v. DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA et al; Sam P.K. Collins and Sam P.K. Collins, “Lawsuit Seeks Damages, Reform and Transparency for DYRS,” The Washington Informer, August 6, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/dc-youth-services-center-abuse-allegations/>.

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<sup>iii</sup> Government of the District of Columbia, “FY 2027 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan,” April 14, 2026, <https://app.box.com/s/npbz022i3jy0vadt8rl08dmb37hl3uq>.

<sup>iv</sup> Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight. “DYRS Secure Facilities Today’s Population Data.” OIJJFO, 2026. <https://oijjfo.dc.gov/node/1689266#embedtabs>.

<sup>v</sup> Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight, “Behavioral Health Services at New Beginnings,” October 27, 2025,

<https://oijjfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oijjfo/publication/attachments/Behavioral%20Health%20Services%20at%20New%20Beginnings%20Final%20Report%20October%2027%2C%202025.pdf>.; Erin Partin and Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, “Juvenile Recidivism: A 2018 Cohort Analysis,” report, *Criminal Justice Coordinating Council*, August 2022, [https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/Juvenile%20Recidivism%202022%20-%20FINAL\\_v2.pdf](https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/Juvenile%20Recidivism%202022%20-%20FINAL_v2.pdf).