

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY MAYOR FOR PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE**



Public Hearing
on

The Structure of Violence Intervention Agencies in the District
Bill 25-695, “Safe Neighborhoods Amendment Act of 2024”

Submitted Testimony of
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Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice

Before the
Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairperson

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10 a.m.
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Room 120
Washington, DC 20004

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, Council members, and staff of the Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety. I'm Lindsey Appiah, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. Today, I'm here to provide Executive testimony on the structure of violence intervention agencies in the District and Bill 25-478, the "Safe Neighborhoods Amendment Act of 2024."

Reducing crime and violence is the most pressing responsibility we have as a government. Mayor Bowser has frequently emphasized that to advance safety in our city we must work to restore our public safety and justice ecosystem. We have worked alongside Council to recalibrate the accountability arm of our ecosystem through the enactment and implementation of critical legislation that is helping us to decrease crime across the District. As of April 4, 2024, homicide is down by 32%, assaults with dangerous weapons are down 33%, and total violent crime is down 21%. We recognize the tremendous work being done across the ecosystem to make these reductions a reality and thank all of the selfless public servants who are working extremely hard to make our city safer and stronger.

However, we know that there is more work to be done and that includes ensuring the efficient, effective operations of all programs and services aimed at reducing crime and violence, including those focused on prevention. Prevention includes those non-law enforcement programs, services and strategies aimed at decreasing the incidents of individuals committing violent crime, and in reducing the community conditions that lead to high rates of violent crime in communities in our city. It encompasses our work on providing coordinated delivery of wraparound services and connecting our residents and their communities to care. This category includes, but is not limited to, the work of our credible contact continuum comprised of Safe Passage Workers, DYRS Credible Messengers, ONSE Violence Interrupters, and OVSJG Hospital Based Violence Interruption Grantees. The Mayor has made significant investments in prevention and intervention, including in her recent Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal, and our commitment to a public health and a public safety approach to reducing gun violence remains strong.

Specifically, we are proud of the work the ONSE Violence Intervention Initiative ("ONSE VII") does to reduce violence in our city. Since ONSE's inception in 2017, the ONSE VII has grown to serve 25 priority communities, with several of those communities, including Congress Park West,

Brightwood Park, and Mayfair/Paradise, experiencing significant reductions in violent crime in 2023 when compared with 2022, when citywide violence increased. During FY23, ONSE Violence Intervention Specialists (“VIs”) also facilitated 30 mediations and negotiated 14 successful ceasefires. Additionally, the ONSE VII served over 950 families affected by violence in FY23 by connecting them to needed supports and services ranging from housing to counseling. And all this work is continuing to yield results. As of April 4, 2024, ONSE priority communities have a 52% reduction in gun violence when compared with 2023. This work is vital, and we remain committed to investing in these efforts that are helping us to increase safety across our city. Similarly, OAG’s Cure the Streets Program has achieved significant reductions in gun violence through the hard work of their staff and grantees in the communities and neighborhoods that they serve.

It is in the spirit of that commitment, I now turn to Bill 25-695, the “Safe Neighborhoods Amendment Act of 2024.” While the Executive is focused on continuing to partner with the Council on policy proposals to reduce crime and increase the safety of our residents and visitors, we do not support this proposal as introduced.

Title I proposes establishing an independent government agency, the Office of Neighborhood Engagement and Safety Agency (“ONES”), comprised of the Office of Violence Prevention and Health Equity and the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (“NEAR Offices”). The Director of this independent agency would serve a six-year term and be responsible for directing the two offices, administering the Office of Neighborhood Engagement and Safety Administration Fund, and administering the Cure the Streets Program.

We recognize that two of the most critical aspects of a cohesive, highly functioning, and effective public safety and justice system are communication and coordination, including among a host of agencies and stakeholders, both local and federal, working to reduce violence across the District. We are extremely fortunate to have a wide range of entities working in the violence prevention and intervention space; however, the breadth of programs and entities presents a unique challenge to fostering the level of alignment that allows for even more reductions in gun violence. The more we can streamline our structures to create clear, unified reporting chains, and operational efficiency, the better our outcomes will be. Thus, as the Mayor stated on Wednesday during her

presentation before Council on the Fiscal Year 2025 proposed budget and financial plan, the Executive supports merging the District's two violence interruption programs, the Attorney General's Cure the Streets program ("Cure") and ONSE's VII, to combine resources and create a cohesive, single violence intervention program.

As highlighted in the 2022 Office of the DC Auditor NEAR Act Report, both violence intervention programs subscribe to a public health model of violence prevention, largely use the same techniques to effectuate change in their communities and rely on data to inform strategy. We agree with both the Auditor Report and the February 2024 National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform report that merger of the programs could allow us to build upon the gains that both programs have made.

However, we do not believe that standing up an independent agency to house the combined programs is the proper model as it would have negative impact on cost, service delivery, intergovernmental collaboration, and overall efficiency. One of the most critical components of the success of violence intervention efforts is access to services and supports aimed at addressing root causes of violence. These services are primarily housed within Executive agencies and creating an independent agency would lead to challenges in connecting those served with needed resources. The Executive believes that ONSE is appropriately suited to support the merger of the two programs into the agency. ONSE has the existing infrastructure and staff of an agency that currently does this work so the District would not be faced with the administrative and financial burden of setting up a new agency. And as an executive agency, ONSE has the institutional District government relationships necessary to efficiently access the individual and family support services necessary to the success of violence interruption services. We are committed to working with the Office of the Attorney General on a plan that would allow for the efficiency and effectiveness of a single program while preserving and advancing the strengths of both programs.

Next, I turn to those titles aimed at recruitment and retention for the Metropolitan Police Department ("MPD"). Mayor Bowser has maintained that rebuilding our police force to 4,000 sworn officers is of high priority and continues to invest in a host of incentives that are helping us to make gains once again in the recruitment and retention of our sworn officers. Since being named,

Chief Smith has made recruiting one of her top priorities and we are seeing the fruits of all these combined efforts. We appreciate the Council's acknowledgement of the importance of maintaining a strong MPD and partnership in creating an environment that will allow us to recruit and retain the best officers in the country.

Title III tasks my office with preparing a report identifying modern recruitment tactics for MPD for new recruits from the District and surrounding jurisdictions and best practices to retain senior officers. I share Council's desire to add numbers to our force and continually improve MPD hiring practices to attract the best and the brightest; however, there are already several recent reports examining this topic. Specifically, the Police Executive Research Forum's ("PERF") March 2023 report on MPD includes a robust section on recruitment and retention, including assessments and proposals regarding recruiting and retaining women police officers, developing incentives for veteran personnel commensurate to bonuses provided for new recruits, and replacing sworn positions with civilian positions. Additionally, MPD has been lauded by the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services as a leader in utilizing technology and process restructuring to improve recruitment. MPD also regularly surveys recruits to find out what attracted them to MPD and works to build upon agency strengths. We believe that there is an ample body of recruiting research to assist us in furthering recruitment efforts.

Title IV seeks to amend the minimum qualification standards for members of MPD by lowering the educational requirement from 60 hours of post-secondary education at an accredited college or university to successful completion of a high school degree or GED. The Executive does not support this proposal. The education and training of police officers is important in ensuring that they have the information base, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to carry out their tasks in a way that is professional and consistent with the highest standards and expectations that District residents legitimately have of our officers. MPD relies on its high standards of entry to establish a base competency of critical thinking, verbal and written communication, judgement, and problem-solving skills which officers build upon in their academy training and utilize when they must quickly consider and analyze constitutional rights, civil liberties, and other critical conditions while policing. In an effort to uphold high standards while also removing barriers to entry into the workforce, MPD facilitates the UDC & MPD Police Officer Training Cohort and the Cadet Corps

Program. The Cadet Corps Program provides an opportunity for 17- to 24-year-old Washingtonians to earn a salary by serving as a civilian employee, while simultaneously attaining the 60 college credit hours with free tuition. Former MPD Chief Contee became a cadet at the age of 17 in 1989; by 1993, he was a patrol officer. Mayor Bowser has made it a priority to invest in the Cadet Corps Program, expanding it from 20 cadets in 2015 to 150 in 2022. Like MPD's Cadet Corps, the Department's Police Officer Training Cohort serves as a pipeline for those who do not meet all of the qualifications required to become a police officer with MPD. As part of this partnership with the University of the District of Columbia ("UDC") Community College, participants may obtain the 60 college credits required to become a police officer. Participants attend classes on nights and weekends at UDC Community College to earn an associate degree.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the violence intervention specialists, police officers, and the administrative staff who support them, and all of those across the public safety and justice ecosystem as they continue to do the hard and important work of preventing and addressing violence in the District of Columbia. I want to thank Interim Director Kwelli Sneed for her unwavering leadership and commitment to ONSE and the ONSE VII. And I want to thank the public witnesses who appeared at today's hearing and the community members who have shared their perspectives about how public safety is impacting them and how we may strengthen all our programs. We hear you and are committed to working together to continue to make our city one in which residents and visitors across all eight wards can flourish and thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to working with Council on efforts to advance merger of these two critical programs. I am available to answer any questions you may have.