



GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT ON DISABILITY SERVICES

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TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE ON FACILITIES AND FAMILY SERVICES
THE HONORABLE JANESE LEWIS GEORGE, CHAIRPERSON



Good morning, Chairperson Lewis George, members, and staff of the Committee on Facilities and Family Services. I am Andrew Reese, the Director of the Department on Disability Services or “DDS.” The mission of DDS is to provide innovative, high-quality services and supports that enable people with disabilities to lead meaningful and productive lives as vital members of their families, schools, workplaces, and communities in every neighborhood in the District of Columbia. On behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser, I am pleased to provide testimony today on the accomplishments of DDS in Fiscal Year 2023 and our work in Fiscal Year 2024 to date. With me today are Winslow Woodland, Deputy Director for the Developmental Disabilities Administration or “DDA,” Darryl Evans, Deputy Director for the Rehabilitation Services Administration or “RSA,” and Shasta Brown, Deputy Director for the Quality Assurance and Performance Management Administration or “QAPMA.” The story of 2023 was about working together to meet the challenges of the moment and emerging from an unprecedented global pandemic with new approaches and increased engagement.

The federal Public Health Emergency that began nearly four years ago on March 11, 2020, finally came to an end on May 11, 2023, and the flexibilities of Appendix K to the Intellectual and Developmental (IDD) and Individual and Family Supports (IFS) Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waivers expired six months later on November 11, 2023. This six-month period allowed time for a gradual winding down of the public health flexibilities. DDS had been involved in educating the stakeholders of these changes for more than a year through its regular community forums. Beginning in November 2022, and continuing until the end of October 2023, we provided information at community forums, in individual interdisciplinary team meetings and at other outreach events to educate providers and the public

on the Public Health Emergency unwinding plan that ensured supported persons would be fully integrated into the community and have a smooth and gradual transition back to community-based day programming. As part of this effort, we also hosted a Provider Fair on July 19th at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. The Provider Fair connected more than 90 community-based organizations and District agencies with approximately 500 attendees and gave people supported and their families the opportunity to learn about day program options and other topics such as the unwinding of the public health flexibilities, Participant-Directed Services, assistive technology solutions, remote supports, and benefits counseling for persons interested in pursuing competitive, integrated employment. In addition, DDS also made presentations to the Family Support Council and Project ACTION! and regularly attends their monthly meetings.

DDS develops programming and policies and procedures in consultation with internal and external stakeholders. During the past year, DDS worked collaboratively with staff at the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University to complete the Comprehensive State Needs Assessment, evaluating the rehabilitation and independent living needs of people with disabilities who live in DC. The purpose of the triennial assessment is to provide current and relevant information on the needs of individuals with disabilities in the District to inform the development of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) portion of the Unified State Workforce Plan and the State Plan for Independent Living.

DDS is one of 12 District agencies selected for the city's first Racial Equity Pilot Cohort. The pilot program was the result of the Racial Equity Achieves Results (REACH) Emergency Amendment Act, passed by the Council of the District of Columbia in 2020. REACH seeks to

eliminate socioeconomic inequities experienced by African American residents and other people of color in the District. As a pilot agency, DDS has drafted a DDS Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP) which will be finalized and submitted to the Mayor’s Office of Racial Equity this month. We recognize the need to analyze the demographic makeup of persons with disabilities presenting for services to determine, which services people are accessing and outcomes, and whether people from varying backgrounds have differences in their patterns of access and their experiences of care.

Exploratory analyses led us to identify and engage underserved communities to build trust and to connect these communities with services that could impact their quality of life in a positive manner. In 2023, DDS hosted the 4th Annual Latinx Conference for people with disabilities and their families (85 attendees). This free, Spanish-language event gave Spanish-speaking residents with disabilities and their family members access to information, support, and resources in their native language with interpretation available for non-Spanish speakers. In addition to the annual conference, DDS also hosts other Spanish-language outreach events throughout the year offering a hybrid of virtual and in-person options for participation. For example, in March 2023, as part of Developmental Disability Awareness Month, we hosted a workshop on stress reduction for caregivers that was attended by approximately 40 people. DDS also hosted Spanish-language Know Your Rights sessions and a session on Parent Advocacy as well as three information session about DDS services, including a presentation to the Latino Commissioners. Additionally, to broaden our connection with the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities, DDS hosted two community resource events to provide Amharic-speaking residents with disabilities and their family members (70 attendees) access to information and

support, and resources in their native language. The events were conducted in Amharic with interpretation to English and Tigrinya.

In August of 2023, DDS, in collaboration with the DD Council and the DC Bridging Aging and Disability Networks and Racial Equity Community of Practice, hosted a Future Planning Lunch and Learn Series. This three-part series addressed an overview of disability and aging services in DC, financial options and legal decision-making options to plan for the future.

In March 2022, the Council passed, and Mayor Bowser signed, the Developmental Disabilities Eligibility Reform Amendment Act. This legislation allowed DDS to expand eligibility for DDA services to all people with developmental disabilities (DD). Prior to its enactment, eligibility was restricted to people with intellectual disabilities. Following the passage of this law, Mayor Bowser included funds in her budget to increase staffing in DDA's eligibility unit to ensure the agency had the capacity to process potential new applicants. We hired one additional community liaison, two additional eligibility service coordinators, and one intake supervisor. In 2023, we received 262 applications for DDA services, which was up from 103 applications in 2022 and 91 in 2021. Of the 262 applications received in 2023, 169 were determined to be eligible for services, which was up from 82 in FY 22, and 52 in FY 21.

To meet our projected needs under the DD expansion, American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds were also used to support the DDA Behavioral Health Initiative. The goal of the initiative is to build system capacity to serve people with intellectual or developmental disabilities who are also diagnosed with a co-occurring behavioral health issue to manage behaviors and build functional skills that will result in the improved management and treatment of behavioral health issues in the people served. In October of 2022, and again in July of 2023,

DDS completed intensive training in Positive Behavior Supports for staff of DDS and other D.C. Government agencies as well as DD service providers. Between March and September of 2023, DDS also worked with Support Development Associates (SDA) to offer training on Person Centered Thinking for Dually Diagnosed People.

Another service enhancement realized in 2023 was an amendment to our IFS Waiver by implementing participant-directed services through the *My Life, My Way* program. This program allows participants to be their own bosses, acting as common law employers to manage their own staff. This means they will be able to hire someone they trust, like a family member, to help meet their needs and, with the help of a third-party support broker entity, oversee their own budget and manage taxes and payroll. DDS has submitted nine (9) referrals to the contracted Fiscal Management Services Agency, GT Independence (GTI). As GTI continues to work diligently with DDS to enroll and activate participants into *My Life My Way*, we are excited to announce the activation of our first participant this month, with three more initial budgets underway.

The COVID-19 public health emergency highlighted the negative impact of the digital divide for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. People had difficulty getting services, were socially isolated, did not have access to technology that could connect them to others, or the know-how to set up and use increasingly vital technologies. DDS recognized the urgency of responding to this critical gap, which impacted every aspect of people's lives. We launched the Technology First Initiative, which reflects the heart of DDS's mission to provide innovative, high-quality services that enable people with disabilities to lead meaningful productive lives.

The integration of Remote Supports and Urgent Care Telehealth Services during COVID-19 demonstrated their value and DDS worked with the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) to develop regulations under the IDD HCBS waiver that would expand Remote Supports to include new services after the flexibilities of Appendix K expired. People can now receive virtual services and supports beyond their home, and into their workplace and community.

Looking ahead, we are launching the DDS Enabling Technology Project, which will accelerate our Technology First Initiative by introducing an Artificial Intelligence (AI) web-based platform designed to automate the matching of individuals with IDD to suitable Enabling Technologies, such as Assistive Technology and Remote Supports. DDS will award a contract in FY24 to spearhead the project, focusing on implementation strategy, technology matching, acquisition, delivery, installation, and training.

In January of 2023, DDS, along with 15 partner agencies, applied for and were awarded a technical assistance grant through the National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON) program for a State as Model Employer (SAME) initiative. This initiative supports Mayor Bowser's priority to have our government workforce reflect the residents of DC by expanding employment for people with disabilities District-wide through modeling best practices in hiring and retention of people with disabilities within government agencies.

Working with nationally recognized subject matter experts, partner District agencies, community partners, and self-advocates, we completed a Landscape Assessment reviewing current District policies, programs and initiatives designed to expand employment for people with disabilities in DC and in DC government and recommended next steps to build on these

initiatives. This information was used to develop a State as a Model Employer Strategic Plan to guide the initiative with clear objectives and action steps. Then, in November 2023, DDS was awarded another grant of 200 hours of technical assistance (TA) from the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) to focus on four strategies to continue the implementation of DC's initiative. In addition to the work supported by the grant, DDS and partner agencies are continuing to work on additional strategies identified as priorities in the strategic plan for FY 24 that fall outside of the TA funded by ODEP.

Even as we innovate, expand, and conduct outreach, we continue to do the hard, quiet work of hitting our performance marks, delivering services quickly and efficiently. On the RSA side, entry level wages for people with disabilities who found work in the District averaged \$2.81 per hour above the minimum wage in 2023 and are averaging \$4.17 above average for FY24 to date. 80% of high school students ages 16-22 received at least one pre-employment transition service during the school year surpassing our goal of 75%. We surpassed our target for the percentage of participants who obtained a recognized postsecondary credential after participating in an education or training program during the program year.

The Disability Determination Division (DDD) continued to have a consistently strong performance in 2023 clearing 20,304 cases. This was 164% of our goal and placed DDD as number one in the region. The mean processing time for cases was 145.4 days for FY 2023 and 172.5 days in FYTD 24. These processing times were shorter than the national mean processing times of 167.2 days for FY 23 and 180.7 days in FYTD 24.

On the DDA side, we are well outpacing our targets on timeliness in conducting Level of Need assessments, completing Individual Supports Plans, and closing investigations. The

median number of calendar days to complete the initial ISP was 39 days in FY23 and 43 days in FYTD 24, which are well below the target of 90 days.

Our fundamentals are strong because our team is so committed and resilient. I would like to thank every member of our staff. Things like waiver amendments, ARPA initiatives, and changes to our internal policies that improve the lives of the people we serve are only realized through the hard work and dedication of members of our team. Our agency is full of people willing to speak up, adapt, and do whatever it takes to fulfill our mission. It is that spirit which drives the positive outcomes you see throughout our responses to the pre-hearing questions.

That spirit is shared by our provider community and the DSPs who bring resolve, grace, and talent to their critical work. Recognizing and retaining DSPs is vital to our mission and the mission of the Bowser Administration. That is why DDS has worked with DHCF in implementing another ARPA initiative to provide annual allocations to provider agencies to allow them to increase wages for direct support workers to 117.6% of the living wage.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the public witnesses who testified today. At DDS, we don't do anything in a vacuum. On the DDA side, we have convened an HCBS Waiver Advisory Committee of 15 stakeholders to provide feedback on every policy and procedure we issue. On the RSA side, we have a State Rehabilitation Council that holds quarterly public meetings regarding the operation of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, an active Employment Innovations Workgroup with community partners that meets monthly, and a public hearing process that ensures thoughtful and constructive stakeholder engagement. We are fortunate to benefit from the ongoing guidance of the Developmental Disabilities Council, the Family Support Council, and a robust community of self-advocates, family members, legal



service providers, and other local and national partners. Performance oversight is a natural extension of these inclusive, deliberative efforts, and we will follow up on all the feedback we have received today.

Chairperson, I would like to thank you and your staff for your dedication to this work. We at DDS see, and appreciate, your hard work, and your commitment to these vulnerable District residents. We look forward to continued collaboration with you.

Finally, I want to thank Mayor Bowser. Her dedication to the dignity and independence of people with disabilities will continue to make the District a more equitable and accessible place for all residents.

This concludes my testimony. My team and I are happy to address your questions.