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Council of the District of Columbia
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John A. Wilson Building
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June 18, 2025

Dear Councilmembers:

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia (ACLU-D.C.) and our over 14,000 members in all 8 wards, I am writing to you today about priorities for the fiscal year 2026 (FY26) budget.

We appreciate Council giving the public the opportunity each year to testify on pieces of the budget. Because crafting a budget that best serves D.C. residents involves making a set of resource-constrained decisions with a tight deliberation window, this year in particular, we thought it important to highlight some key principles and areas of investment that we hope Council will prioritize.

The ACLU-D.C. is committed to working to dismantle systemic racism, safeguard fundamental liberties, and advocate for sensible, evidence-based solutions. If budgets are moral documents, then these are the values that must be reflected in the D.C. budget as a whole.

With economic challenges looming for D.C. residents including mass federal layoffs and the serious threats of Congress slashing resources people need to help cover tax cuts for the wealthy, D.C. government should especially protect our most vulnerable residents, particularly those being directly attacked by the Federal government.

At a time when the Mayor could choose to lead, putting the values of our community front and center by proposing funding that back-fills for Federal cuts and protects marginalized and attacked communities, the Mayor's proposed budget does the opposite. It leans out from rather than into supporting D.C.'s young people, families, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ residents. Without action from Council to right divestments and add support at a time when many in our community are under attack, the FY26 budget could exacerbate already extreme racial and economic inequities in the District.

Outlined below are priority issues the Council should consider when finalizing the FY26 budget.

Support the Rights of DC Residents

The rights guaranteed to criminal suspects, defendants, offenders and prisoners are not mere technicalities. They are fundamental rights guaranteed to all people in the United States. The budget must provide for the various ways that the government ensures these rights are protected.

We urge the Council to:

- Support stable funding and permanent status for the Criminal Code Reform Commission (CCRC). The CCRC serves many vital purposes such as ensuring criminal laws in the District are constitutional, redrafting criminal code sections that are not working as intended, and recently the CCRC developed the most comprehensive sentencing database that is publicly available to guide sentencing parameters in the criminal code.
- Restore local funding for capital improvements to the D.C. Jail. Conditions at the D.C. Jail require immediate fiscal attention, which is evident in the recent report, *Urgent Need for New D.C. Jail*.
- Ensure full implementation of the Corrections Oversight Improvement Omnibus Act at the Department of Corrections (DOC). An additional \$225,000 in the FY26 budget would cover the creation of two positions. This funding must be recurring, with additional budgetary investments to sustain the positions, adjusted for cost-of-living increases and inflation. Without this critical funding to implement these oversight functions, the Corrections Information Council (CIC) will fail to carry out its mandate to inspect, monitor, and report on the conditions of confinement at facilities where D.C. residents are incarcerated. This funding is crucial because this is the last year Section 7 of this bill can be funded or it will disappear, as it has been unfunded for the last two budget cycles.

Support Safety in our Communities

We share a common goal of living in a safe D.C. Our D.C. budget should reflect that goal by ensuring that our approaches to safety are broad, address root causes, and focus on leveraging the resilience of our people while protecting our most vulnerable residents. Evidence on recidivism and violence prevention shows that policing and incarcerating alone do not meaningfully reduce either. Better approaches to community safety leverage this growing body of evidence by funding diversion, restorative justice, reentry, and victim support programs.

We urge the Council to:

- Support the current funding levels for the Restorative Justice Program at the Office of the Attorney General (OAG). The program provides closure and empowerment to participating victims of crime and allows offenders to learn from the incident, thus supporting reintegration.
- Continue to explore the best way to combine the District's violence interrupter programs that currently sit in both OAG and the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, keeping the overall funding level for these programs the same. In exploring potentially combining the program, the Council should consider the potential benefits of independence in relation to the program operating under the OAG.
- Limit increases in MPD's budget and prioritize funding that has positive impacts on community safety and wellbeing such as funding for behavioral health, early intervention, diversion, reentry, and victim support services
 - o According to the D.C. Auditor, MPD has adequate staffing but needs to work to better deploy officers and make policy changes to use professional staff to fill roles with largely administrative tasks.

- Do not fund unspecified technology for MPD without a separate hearing process and briefing on it. Surveillance technologies raise significant privacy concerns, which are exacerbated for groups subject to over-policing and surveillance—namely Black and brown communities, low-income communities, politically active groups, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.
- Support stable funding levels for the Department of Parks and Recreation site-based programming, specifically programming for teenagers. The Mayor has publicly called for an earlier curfew for youth in the District, but our communities would be better served by having more programming options to provide safe, pro-social, developmentally appropriate, educational, and career-promoting programming for the District’s young people.

Support Families

D.C. has shown a strong commitment to providing economic support to families. Continuing that commitment is even more critical now. D.C. residents have been impacted by Federal layoffs, businesses and workers are on high alert due to the threat of immigration raids, and the economy is vulnerable to the impact of tariffs. Furthermore, threats to Medicaid, education funding, and the new instability of the Federal grant funding environment is straining the safety net on which families can rely for support.

Families living in or close to poverty are more vulnerable to economic downturns, and support for these families should be prioritized. Likewise, the magnitude of racial inequity in the District requires that more be done to shore up the cash resources of Black and brown families, particularly those with low to poverty-level incomes. Poverty and economic hardship have deep, long-lasting effects on children and their lives, including how long children stay in school and how well they do in school. Longer-term, research shows how early poverty can impact the earning potential of the adults that children become.

Even in a year with an expected reduction in the overall budget, D.C. must continue its work to keep families healthy and safe.

We urge the Council to:

- Support programs that provide financial assistance to families in need. These programs provide stability for the health and safety of the District’s children.
 - Fully fund Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), including keeping the annual cost of living adjustment. TANF provides cash assistance for families on very low incomes and who have children and is critical to ensuring families can pay rent, keep the lights on, and can afford other basic necessities.
 - Fully fund the D.C. Child Tax Credit and the “baby bonds” program, both of which work to reduce racial, income, and wealth gaps.
 - Fully fund the “Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act of 2022,” to increase the minimum monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit and help residents get food on the table.
- Increase funding to the DC Child Care Subsidy Program to backfill for an estimated \$5.7 million gap to child care subsidies due to a loss of federal programs. The program supports low and moderate income families as well as families with other special circumstances,

providing access to high-quality education and child care in the district. This shortfall could lead to a program waitlist for the first time in decades.

- Oppose phasing out D.C.'s Health Care Alliance coverage for adults over age 21 and instituting a moratorium on new enrollees. The D.C. Health Care Alliance program provides critical health care coverage to residents with low incomes who do not qualify for Medicaid, most of whom are immigrants.

Support Vulnerable Communities

D.C. is known for being a welcoming community, and that is why so many people choose to make the District their home. But that does not mean the work to protect vulnerable communities is over, particularly at a time when the federal government is targeting these same groups. The District must reaffirm the commitment to protect and uplift these groups, and the budget should reflect that.

We urge the Council to:

- Oppose the proposed 67% cut to the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants' (OVSJG) Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ) – a cut of \$21.211 million. Almost 40,000 District residents receive life-changing civil legal services from District non-profits through ATJ each year. More than 200 District agencies and community organizations like health clinics, schools, libraries, and social services agencies rely on partnerships with ATJ-funded legal services organizations to help the people they serve. These cuts would be felt by residents across all eight Wards. These services are also being directly impacted by cuts to federally funded grants through the Department of Justice.
- Better understand the changes to the offices that currently fall under the Mayor's Offices of Community Affairs and whether these changes would: (1) reduce the overall amount of grant funding available for providers that support our community; (2) increase competition for these grant funds; (3) jeopardize the visibility, accountability, and targeted impact of funded programs; (4) or reduce transparency and limit the ability of advocates and community members to engage meaningfully in the budget process. If the proposed changes would have any of these impacts, we urge the Council to amend the budget to mitigate for these impacts.
- Support funding for small grant programs that have an outsize impact for vulnerable populations.
 - For example, the Transgender, Non-binary, and Gender-Nonconforming (TGNC) Workforce Programs, funded through the Department of Human Services at approximately \$600,000 a year, provides essential employment pathways in a labor market where TGNC individuals face entrenched discrimination and instability. Continued investment helps to ensure long-term economic equity and build a stronger, more inclusive workforce.

We share a common goal of living in a community that is safe for all and provides opportunities for all. While a leaner projected budget means making difficult cuts, we hope the Council will ensure that D.C.'s budget reflects the values of the D.C. community. The ACLU-D.C. looks forward to continuing our work with the Council to achieve these goals.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A. J. Yass', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Alicia J. Yass
Supervising Policy Counsel