

**Testimony on behalf of the
American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia
before the D.C. Council Committee on Facilities
Performance Oversight Hearing
on the Department of Parks and Recreation**

February 12, 2026

Good morning, Chairperson Lewis George and members of the Committee. My name is Peggy Ramin, and I am the Policy Counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia (ACLU-D.C.). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on behalf of our over 14,000 members and supporters across the District.

The ACLU-D.C. shares with Chairperson Lewis George and the members of this Committee what we believe to be a common goal: empowering our young residents to lead healthy, productive lives, and making our communities safer, stronger, and more resilient. Relying on outdated approaches to public safety—such as over-policing and over-incarceration—is ineffective and does not make our communities safer. Instead, D.C. must prioritize systems and programs that support our communities, provide holistic security, and invest in the incredible potential of our youth in D.C.

The Council and the Department of Parks and Recreation must continue to invest in facilities, programs, and resources that provide young people with safe spaces to grow and develop. Our communities will flourish when we take a preventive, rather than punitive, approach to youth development and public safety. We believe this holistic approach will make our communities safer, and help the District's young residents grow into healthy, successful adults.

I. The Council and the Department of Parks and Recreation must invest in programming and resources for young people that reinforce a prevention- and support-based approach to public safety.

ACLU-D.C.'s recent report, *Building Safety Through Resources: A Better Path to Public Safety in D.C.*,¹ outlines a public safety approach centered on prevention and support, rather than over-reliance on policing and jails. It is well documented that public policy solutions that address the root causes of public safety issues and stop crime before it happens keep our communities safer and more secure. The report details ways that the District can invest in community safety and security through prevention, and by supporting families, youth, and community reentry.

When families struggle to meet their basic needs at home, it causes instability and worse outcomes for children. In the District, child poverty is higher than it is for the nation at 17.1 percent,

¹ ACLU-D.C., “Building Safety Through Resources: A Better Path to Public Safety in D.C.,” Feb. 2026, <https://www.acludc.org/app/uploads/2025/10/2025-ACLU-D.C.-Report-Building-Safety-Through-Resources.pdf>.

versus 13.7.² Thirty-six percent of Black children in D.C. are living below the poverty line.³ Economic assistance programs help families to achieve a stable income, and benefits extend beyond the families who are receiving assistance to the communities in which they live and local economies as a whole.⁴ This includes investment in community programming and recreation that supports families' needs; in nutrition assistance that gives families access to healthy, nutritious food; access to affordable health care; and access to high quality child care. Additionally, families in the District deserve access to high quality facilities, services, and programming, regardless of the ward they reside in. When we invest in families' stability and safety, children can thrive.

Unfortunately, for many young people, critical services and supports are offered only after they have already become engaged with the criminal legal system. Research has shown that incarceration undermines public safety, is harmful to young people's physical and mental health, exposes them to abuse, and impedes their education and career attainment.⁵ Early intervention in the form of well-funded and well-implemented programming, facilities, and supports can make all the difference for a child's development. The Council and the Department of Parks and Recreation should invest in the creation of places where young people feel that they belong – safe spaces where kids can be kids. Access to these supports during formative stages of brain and social development are critical for a young person's success, especially for those children that have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences.⁶ Additionally, the imposition of onerous curfew requirements on young people does not make our communities safer; rather, they further criminalize youth and put more kids at risk of getting caught up in an already troubled system. D.C. must prioritize non-carceral approaches to public safety that address these underlying challenges that young people face, partnering with D.C. youth and community leaders to create meaningful interventions.

As we know, pervasive systemic inequalities often lead young people into involvement with the legal system, including poverty; housing instability; abuse and untreated trauma; access to health care, mental health treatment, and substance use services; and access to quality education and extracurricular opportunities. Research has shown that the best way to prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviors is to provide a holistic system of support and services that address the root causes of challenges that present as behavioral problems. These systems include building healthy relationships with trusted adults; providing stable housing; ensuring access to mental and behavioral health services that include

² Conor Zielinski, "DC Contends with Extreme Child Poverty Disparities by Race, Place, and Age," DC Fiscal Policy Institute, March 10, 2025, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/dc-contends-with-extreme-child-poverty-disparities-by-race-place-and-age/>; Emily A. Shrider, "Poverty in the United States: 2023," U.S. Census Bureau, September 10, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p60-283.html>.

³ Erica Williams, "District Child Tax Credit Bill is a Tool for Tackling Child Poverty and Should be Strengthened," DC Fiscal Policy Institute, January 24, 2024, <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/dc-ctc-testimony-2024/>.

⁴ Bradley L. Hardy et al., "Child Tax Credit Has a Critical Role in Helping Families Maintain Economic Stability," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 14, 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/child-tax-credit-has-a-critical-role-in-helping-families-maintain-economic>.

⁵ Michael Fitzgerald, "Top Scholars Expect Continued Crime Declines, Despite Decreased Incarceration," The Imprint Youth & Family News, October 8, 2020, <https://imprintnews.org/justice/juvenile-justice-2/crime-declines-despite-decreased-incarceration/48044>.

⁶ ACLU-D.C., "Building Safety Through Resources: A Better Path to Public Safety in D.C.," Feb. 2026, <https://www.acludc.org/app/uploads/2025/10/2025-ACLU-D.C.-Report-Building-Safety-Through-Resources.pdf> (at 11-12).

skills for self-regulation and de-escalation; creating places where young people feel that they belong; and establishing pathways to viable employment training and opportunities. Young people also need environments that encourage positive risk-taking and pro-social behaviors. Whether a program is designed for crime prevention or diversion from a criminal conviction, the program should focus on repairing harm, rehabilitation, and promoting success, rather than simply punishment and control. Kids, and ultimately the broader community, will be safer and better served when we focus resources and investment on early intervention and diversion, rather than on prosecution and commitment.

When developing programming, best and promising practices suggest that youth crime prevention programs should be primarily community-based and led by community organizations. Youth programs that teach leadership skills and empower kids and teenagers to lead within their peer groups can be especially effective. We are glad to see Councilmembers introduce legislation that recognizes the need for community-led and community-centered opportunities. One such example is Councilmember Pinto's Prosper DC Plan,⁷ a recently introduced package of legislation that seeks to improve public safety in part by addressing some of the youth development and opportunity gaps for young people in D.C. The package includes the Teen Center Establishment Amendment Act of 2025, legislation that supports teens by addressing gaps in recreational programming by requiring DPR to establish and operate at least four comprehensive teen centers in each quadrant of the District. DC Public Library currently operates an effective Teen Council, a paid leadership opportunity that empowers teens to be leaders in the library, in their communities, and among their peers.⁸ The teen council model can be integrated into nearly any area, whether it is mental health, sexual health, recreation, educational settings, or government and civic engagement. Additionally, we recognize Chairperson Lewis George's advocacy for our pools and recreation centers, important spaces where young people can gather safely, through the introduction of the Weekend Equal Access to Swimming Amendment Act, requiring the Department of Parks and Recreation to provide equivalent morning, evening, and weekend hours of public operation in all publicly owned indoor aquatic facilities.⁹ We encourage all Councilmembers to continue to replicate these effective models into future program and facility development plans.

The Department of Parks and Recreation has made strides toward the development of programming and facilities designed to meet the community's needs and provide diversionary alternatives for young people. We hope to see additional progress made toward the goals outlined in the agency's FY 2026 Performance Plan¹⁰ this fiscal year. At minimum, communities need equal access to robust programming and services and functioning, accessible facilities across wards, especially those that serve lower-income residents. As program enrollment and the number of visitors to facilities continue to increase, the agency must keep up with the needs of communities. This includes the development and implementation of diverse and responsive programming. Aquatic programming, food and nutrition services, and community programs are all important ways the Department can serve young people and

⁷ Press Release: Councilmember Brooke Pinto Introduces Her "Prosper DC Plan" to Catalyze Economic Opportunities in the District, Nov. 17, 2025, <https://www.brookepintodc.com/newsroom/press-release-councilmember-brooke-pinto-introduces-her-prosper-dc-plan-to-catalyze-economic-opportunities-in-the-district>.

⁸ DC Public Library, Teen Council, <https://www.dclibrary.org/find-borrow/teens/teen-council>.

⁹ Legislative Accomplishments, Janeese Lewis George, DC Council Ward 4, <https://janeeseward4.com/legislative-priorities/>.

¹⁰ Department of Parks and Recreation, FY 2026 Performance Plan, Nov. 26, 2025, <https://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/FY26%20Plan%20-%20DPR.pdf>.

their families. In particular, there is a continued need for out-of-school time (OST) activities. After-school and evening programming provides a safe, supportive, and structured after-school environment for kids, providing caregivers with a secure place for their child to receive supervision and social development. The Department of Parks and Recreation's break camps and teen programming, including leadership development programs and mobile recreation activities, provide additional enrichment and recreation for kids. We urge the Department to continue to increase and improve these offerings geared toward our young people.

II. Conclusion

To help our young people thrive and avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, D.C.'s elected officials, advocates, and communities must prioritize non-carceral approaches to public safety that address the underlying challenges that young people face. Young people and their families need continued investment in programming that builds leadership skills and confidence, and facilities that provide a structured, safe environment for kids to grow. We seek to limit the current system's harm and reach and to transform our city's approach to safety into a system focused on prevention, not punishment. The District must continue to invest in and build out comprehensive, equitable programming, services, and facilities that are responsive to the needs of young people and their families across the city.

Instead of over-policing and over-incarcerating our young people, our city must continue to invest resources in non-carceral solutions that help young people to become the best versions of themselves. When we invest in the District's youngest residents, we are investing in solutions that provide a holistic sense of security for our communities across the city. The ACLU-D.C. is ready to work with you and alongside community partners toward a safer, stronger D.C. for all.