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**Testimony on behalf of the  
American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia  
before the D.C. Council Committee on Youth Affairs  
Budget Oversight Hearing  
on the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

**Hearing on May 7, 2026  
Submitted on May 7, 2026**

Good morning, Chairperson Parker 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.

Our testimony today addresses our recommendations regarding the District's Fiscal Year 2027 (FY27) budget for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). The ACLU-D.C. supports stable funding levels for DYRS, but funds must be appropriately used by DYRS to fulfill its commitment to improving conditions and access to programming and placements for young people that support rehabilitation and address recidivism. We believe investment in our justice-involved youth helps the District's young residents grow into healthy, successful adults, which will in turn make our communities safer. We continue to support the overarching goal of reducing the number of children that are in custody in the District overall. To accomplish this, the District must fully fund the programs and resources young people and their families need in the community to lead healthy, productive, and safe lives.

**I. Full funding for rehabilitative support and programming for justice-involved youth, both while in custody and upon release, is necessary to prevent recidivism and to promote a holistic approach to public safety.**

ACLU-D.C.'s recent report, *Building Safety Through Resources: A Better Path to Public Safety in D.C.*,<sup>1</sup> 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 D.C. can invest in community safety and security through prevention, and by supporting families, youth, and community reentry.

D.C. must fully fund interventions that provide rehabilitation and address recidivism for young people that become engaged with the legal system. Young people who need mental health treatment or substance use services while in custody must receive that help without delay. Kids must have access to robust and regular education programming while in custody, and planning for transition back to community schools must be promptly completed. Staff must be fully trained and competent to provide safe custody, and staffing shortages must be addressed. Issues with overcrowding and other facility issues

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

must be promptly resolved. Children should not be sent hundreds of miles away to a facility where family members cannot visit them, or be left waiting in custody while the agency decides where to send them. Release planning must be completed with adequate time to ensure that kids will receive the care and resources they need upon release, including transition to an appropriate and individualized community placement that will ensure the child can successfully reintegrate into the community.

When these basic services are provided and the needs of youth are met, the investment pays dividends when these children grow into healthier, more secure adults, which in turn leads to safer communities overall. DYRS must allocate adequate funds toward the programs and services within its purview that will meet the needs of the young people in its custody. Funds must be used to improve the quality and availability of programming and services that children need to thrive, and that take a rehabilitative approach, rather than used to expand capacity to keep even more children in custody.

## **II. The Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services must be adequately funded, and use funds to fulfill its commitment to provide appropriate and comprehensive rehabilitative support, programming, and reentry planning.**

ACLU-D.C. supports a stable funding level for DYRS in local funds for FY27. However, funds must be used to address existing issues and improve overall quality and delivery of programming and services to youth. Despite some improvements, basic health and safety concerns continue to be at issue for youth in DYRS custody, including issues with overcrowding, physical altercations, and access to behavioral health services and adequate programming.<sup>2</sup> And when it does come time for a young person to return to their community, discharge and reentry planning undertaken by the agency continues to fall short.

Despite this, the FY27 proposed budget for DYRS cuts funding in a number of budget areas that could help to alleviate some of these issues. FY27 budget allocations show a \$296,000 decrease in funding for case management; a \$169,000 decrease to economic opportunities development; a \$270,000 decrease to youth engagement; and a \$4,374,000 decrease to community outreach.<sup>3</sup> The proposed FY27 budget's biggest jump in funding goes toward its residential budget line, with an increase of over \$10.4 million. It is troubling that the proposed FY27 budget does not increase or even maintain investment in budget lines that support individualized case management and planning with youth and their families; educational and professional development opportunities and programming; violence preventative services and support programs; or community-based support services and outreach. Instead, it shows an exorbitant jump in residential funding. And while the DYRS proposed budget requests this massive increase in residential funding for FY27, juvenile facilities oversight has remained unfunded since FY25.

DYRS funding priorities should not skew toward increasing the capacity of its facilities to incarcerate even more children, while chronic understaffing and programming and service availability for children currently incarcerated remains at issue. In what appears to be a trend across the FY27 proposed budget, the DYRS proposed budget cuts important programs and services that serve children and their families, instead of focusing on addressing existing gaps for children in custody, and improving reentry into the community that will support children's success.

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Court Excellence, "Committed Youth Awaiting Placement in the D.C. Youth Services Center," Oct. 2025, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659c0df344c9c8325dd821ca/68eff0152e361f5c93521d86\\_YouthAwaitingPlacement\\_for%20website.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659c0df344c9c8325dd821ca/68eff0152e361f5c93521d86_YouthAwaitingPlacement_for%20website.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services FY2027 Proposed Budget, [https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/jz0\\_dyrs\\_chapter\\_2027a.pdf](https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/jz0_dyrs_chapter_2027a.pdf).

Full funding levels are essential to provide the full range of programming and services children need in DYRS custody and once they return to their community. However, DYRS must do its part to provide critical programming and interventions, and complete timely reentry planning, to help ensure young people are able to reintegrate into their communities and make their commitment with DYRS their last touch with the system.

### **III. Conclusion**

Justice involved young people and their families need more investment in intervention, programming, and resources – not less. We seek to limit the current system’s harm and reach and to transform the District’s approach to safety into a system focused on prevention, not punishment. Ultimately, this means dramatically reducing the number of children in custody in the District, and providing community investments that will address the root of youth involvement in the justice system. As we work toward that fundamental goal, we urge Council to provide full and stable funding to DYRS to address the well-documented need for improved access to programs, rehabilitation, treatment, and reentry services to youth in custody. DYRS must also do its part to use much-needed funding to provide programs and services that invest in the health, safety, and future success of children in the District.