

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH REHABILITATION SERVICES**



**Fiscal Year 2025 Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Committee on Youth Affairs  
Zachary Parker, Chairperson  
Council of the District of Columbia

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Good morning, Chairperson Parker, members of the Committee on Youth Affairs, government witnesses, and members of the public. I am Sam Abed, Director of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on DYRS's progress and accomplishments for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) and to date, Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26).

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor Appiah for their leadership and continued commitment to ensuring safety, accountability, and opportunity for youth across the District of Columbia. I would also like to thank Team DYRS. Their commitment to our mission has fueled our progress over the past year. Despite real challenges, FY25 was a year of meaningful progress in operations, safety, partnerships, prevention, and innovation. Today, I will highlight several key areas of impact.

***Progress Reducing Awaiting Placement***

DYRS has taken deliberate, operationally focused steps to prioritize reducing the time youth spend awaiting placement into appropriate treatment programs by strengthening staffing capacity, expanding placement options, improving assessment timeliness, and instituting tighter management oversight.

First, we reallocated staffing resources to strengthen the Pre-Commitment Unit, where placement activity is initiated and coordinated. Two staff members were reassigned from commitment units to the Pre-Commitment Unit, and two additional staff members were reassigned from the Team Decision Making (TDM) team to Case Management, increasing frontline capacity to complete assessments, coordinate placements, and move cases forward more efficiently.

Second, DYRS expanded the number and diversity of available treatment beds through new and expanded Human Care Agreements (HCAs). These include agreements with two Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs), Devereux of Georgia and Hill Crest (Alabama), and with Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs) at Clock Tower (Pennsylvania) and Brooksville (Florida). DYRS also established an HCA with Cedar Ridge Group Home (Maryland) and converted an umbrella shelter into a dedicated male group home to increase placement options for youth with

lower clinical needs. In addition, we executed an HCA with Abraxas of Ohio to secure inpatient substance use disorder treatment capacity for youth requiring specialized services. We are also actively collaborating with OCP to solicit additional placements for youth.

Next, we addressed assessment-related delays by strengthening Youth Level of Service (YLS) capacity and timeliness. The agency contracted with Multi-Health Systems, Inc. to enhance YLS training for all case management staff through online and in-person instruction. The contract includes a dedicated technical assistance consultant who works directly with the Pre-Commitment team to reduce delays in completing initial YLS assessments. DYRS further expanded this effort by contracting for additional in-person training for the entire care coordination unit, with a focus on developing YLS-informed case plans, conducting timely reassessments, and ensuring case plans are updated as youth needs change.

Lastly, we strengthened management oversight and accountability by establishing a weekly awaiting placement review process. These meetings review every youth awaiting placement, identify barriers, assign follow-up actions, and escalate issues as needed. The reviews are led by the Placement Unit Program Manager and overseen by the Deputy Director of Youth and Family Programs, ensuring sustained executive attention and rapid problem resolution. Collectively, these actions have reduced assessment bottlenecks, increased the availability of appropriate treatment beds, and improved coordination across units, resulting in shorter wait times for youth to access clinically appropriate placements and services. At the same time, we focused on safety inside our facilities.

### ***Safety and Security in DYRS Facilities***

During the summer months, the agency experienced an increase in critical incidents at New Beginnings, largely driven by a small number of youth who repeatedly engaged in disruptive behavior. In response, we implemented weekly Safety and Security meetings focused on individualized intervention and accountability. These meetings are designed to address the specific needs and behaviors of youth involved in multiple incidents and to prevent further escalation. Each youth is assigned a tailored safety plan that identifies behavioral triggers, outlines proactive intervention strategies, and establishes clear, safe responses in the event of a crisis.

These meetings bring together a multidisciplinary team, including Behavioral Health, Restorative Justice staff, Juvenile Justice Institutional Counselors (JJIC), Facility Supervisors, and agency leadership. This coordinated approach ensures that youth are supported consistently across clinical, operational, and supervisory functions. In addition, we have engaged credible messengers to work alongside facility leadership to meet directly with youth, reinforce de-escalation strategies, and provide guidance rooted in trust and lived experience. Through these targeted, individualized interventions and enhanced cross-team collaboration, DYRS has strengthened its ability to manage high-risk behaviors and protect youth and staff. As a result of these efforts, New Beginnings' critical incident rate decreased from just under 17 per thousand bed nights in July of 2025 to 8.6 in December.

***Partnership with Court Social Services Division (CSSD)***

Beyond facility operations, we strengthened our system partnerships. We've spent considerable time deepening our collaboration with the Court Social Services Division, under the leadership of its new Director, Dr. Malcolm Woodland. From the outset of his tenure, Dr. Woodland and DYRS leadership have prioritized closer coordination between supervision and service delivery to improve outcomes for court-involved youth while maintaining public safety. A central focus of this collaboration is the joint work between DYRS's Rapid Response Team and CSSD's GPS Monitoring Unit. Together, we are aligning protocols for responding to GPS alerts and violations in the community to ensure timely, proportional, and developmentally appropriate responses. Rather than relying on delayed or siloed decision-making, this coordinated approach enables real-time communication, shared situational awareness, and faster intervention when youth begin to show signs of instability or non-compliance. The goal of this partnership is twofold. First, it enhances supervision by allowing CSSD and DYRS to respond more quickly and effectively to GPS-related concerns, connecting youth to supports, services, or corrective action before behaviors escalate. Second, it is designed to reduce unnecessary probation violations that push lower-risk youth deeper into the system and into commitment, when community-based responses are more appropriate and effective. This partnership reflects a shared commitment to move away from reflexive enforcement responses and toward more balanced accountability and community-based solutions.

***Oasis Violence Prevention Program***

Prevention also remained a core priority. Our Oasis Violence Prevention Program serves as a model for community-centered violence prevention, meaningful youth engagement, and early intervention. In FY25, Oasis served 2,847 youth, operating as a safe and vibrant community hub. Oasis’s impact is driven by strong cross-agency and community partnerships, including The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Department of Human Resources (DHS), Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), DC Public Schools (DCPS), DC Department of Transportation (DDOT), Department of Recreation (DPR), Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Earth Conservation Corps, Capital Guardian Youth Challenge Academy, the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy, and neighborhood partners in Benning Terrace and Potomac Gardens. These collaborations connect youth to mentorship, recreation, academic support, workforce exposure, restorative programming, and culturally responsive opportunities.

This year also marked a milestone in the program with the inclusion of youth committed to DYRS at New Beginnings into Oasis programming. Through the Restorative Justice Initiative, youth participated in weekly campus visits that featured team building, outdoor activities, peer mentoring, and vocational experiences. Youth earning a GED or high school diploma also engaged in a hands-on carpentry internship through the Maya Angelou Academy, building job skills in the Oasis maker space. We remain committed to sustaining and expanding Oasis as a cornerstone of prevention and community-based support.

***Advancing Best Practices Through Research, Innovation, and Youth Voice***

We’ve also advanced best practices through research and youth voice by integrating these into our service model. In FY25, we began collaborating with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Loyola University Maryland to support a research study on sleep health among detained adolescents. This work builds on a growing body of evidence demonstrating that healthy sleep is strongly associated with improved mental health, better behavioral regulation, and reduced delinquency and violence. Through this partnership, researchers are evaluating sleep-wake environments within DYRS facilities and partnering with agency leadership to co-develop strategies tailored to the needs of youth in custody. Findings from this study will inform operational practices and policy decisions, reinforcing DYRS’s commitment to research-driven, evidence-

based care. We have also advanced best practices by elevating youth voices and challenging harmful system narratives. In May 2025, the agency completed its participation in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Narrative Change to Improve Older Youth Practices Learning Cohort, in partnership with the Sasha Bruce Network. This initiative focused on examining and shifting entrenched narratives about older, system-involved youth. As part of DYRS's final project, Title 16 youth worked alongside a DYRS clinician and a Sasha Bruce social worker to create expressive works reflecting their lived experiences. This effort led to the development of *Voices Unlocked*, a narrative change and therapeutic initiative that blends spoken word, trauma-informed counseling, and restorative justice. Through weekly sessions led by a licensed mental health professional and a teaching artist, youth explored themes of identity, accountability, resilience, and healing. Youth participants have since performed their work publicly, demonstrating growth, confidence, and a renewed sense of agency. Together, these efforts reflect our approach to best practices, grounding policy and programming in research, centering youth voice, and innovating to improve outcomes for the young people we serve.

***Operational Strength: Emergency Relocation of Headquarters***

Finally, I would like to acknowledge an extraordinary operational accomplishment. While not formally an achievement, it demonstrated the professionalism and adaptability of the DYRS workforce. After a flood required the agency to vacate our headquarters, our facilities team completed a full building relocation in just 30 days, without outside contractors or additional resources. This was an immense undertaking that required organization, coordination, and unwavering commitment. Their quick action ensured continuity of operations and uninterrupted support for our youth, families, and community.

In closing, FY25 was a year of measurable progress and meaningful innovation for DYRS. From strengthening program access and prevention efforts to enhancing transparency in reporting, strengthening partnerships, and amplifying youth voices, these accomplishments reflect our unwavering commitment to youth rehabilitation and community safety across the District.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.