

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser**



Fiscal Year 2023 Performance Oversight Hearing on

**The District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**

Testimony of

Sam Abed

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**Before the**

Committee on Recreation, Libraries and Youth Affairs

Trayon White, Sr., Chairperson

Council of the District of Columbia

*Virtual Hearing*

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9:00 AM

Good morning, Chairperson Trayon White and members of the Committee on Recreation, Libraries and Youth Affairs. I am Sam Abed, Director of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding DYRS' work in Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23), and the priorities for our work ahead.

It has been eight months since I became director of DYRS. Over that time, I have had the honor of leading an agency of passionate individuals who are committed to DYRS' mission, and who share the agency's vision for improving the lives of youth. At DYRS, our mission is clear. When youth are committed to our care, we strive to give them the opportunity to become more productive members of the community. DYRS does this by providing services that address their unique needs and build on their strengths in the least restrictive and most appropriate setting that is consistent with public safety.

I am grateful for Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor Appiah's leadership and vision for public safety and their support of DYRS as a vital part of the District's public safety ecosystem. This strong commitment was demonstrated through the Mayor's Order 2023-141, which declared a public emergency on juvenile crime and allowed DYRS to access resources immediately to increase placements and agency bed capacity. Since becoming director of DYRS, I have taken the Mayor's charge seriously and have hit the ground running by quickly getting to know the agency, facing challenges head on, taking action to implement solutions, and setting strategic priorities. Those priorities fall into five categories of work that touch all aspects of the agency and together, help the agency achieve better youth outcomes and safer communities.

***Ensuring Youth and Staff Safety.***

The first strategic priority for DYRS is ensuring the safety of the youth in our care, and ensuring the safety of the staff who are there to serve them. I take very seriously that there is no more important role of DYRS than keeping youth safe when detained and committed, while also delivering therapeutic programming that meets their unique needs. Over the past eight months, I have led my team at DYRS in putting in place new policies addressing youth and staff safety. The DYRS secure programs team, headed by an outstanding and experienced leader, has already implemented new protocols at the Youth Services Center (YSC) and at New Beginnings (NB),

including procedures to address contraband entering the facilities. The work DYRS has done thus far is only the beginning. We will continue to seek ways to ensure that agency facilities are safe and secure for both youth and staff.

***Addressing Staffing Challenges and Filling Key Positions.***

The second strategic priority immediately set for the agency was focused on staffing. Making sure that DYRS facilities are adequately staffed and that strong leaders are in place are vital parts of strengthening agency operations and delivering the best services to youth in our care. DYRS has been challenged with staffing shortages, caused by a high number of staff who are unavailable to work. I knew that DYRS urgently needed to address staffing challenges and had to ensure that key leadership positions were filled. The Executive funded 14 new direct care staff positions for DYRS secure programs during this fiscal year (FY24). In addition, the agency hired an outstanding team of senior leaders who have juvenile justice expertise. Since July 2023, my administration has filled the following vital leadership positions:

- Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents at both YSC and New Beginnings;
- Chief Physician;
- Nurse Practitioner Supervisor;
- Chief of Staff;
- Deputy Director of Youth and Family Services;
- Deputy Director of Secure Programs; and
- Chief Integrity Officer for the Office of Internal Integrity.

In our continuing efforts to address staffing challenges, DYRS has been working in collaboration with the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) to identify and address staffing concerns and has also sought the assistance of the Office of Risk Management (ORM) to develop new return to work processes based on best-practice.

***Building a Continuum of Care.***

The third strategic priority is focused on building a continuum of care for DYRS youth. Through the creation of this continuum, DYRS will be well positioned to provide an age and developmentally appropriate system of accountability and treatment that achieves positive youth

outcomes. To achieve this goal, DYRS is working to establish new partnerships with providers and quickly procure qualified placement options that meet the needs of our youth.

As a result of the Mayor's Order, DYRS quickly procured additional shelter and group home placement capacity. DYRS executed a contract for 10 beds at one facility, and DYRS is in the process of finalizing another contract for an additional six beds. In FY23, DYRS quickly renovated and opened a new unit at YSC, which added 10 additional beds.

In addition to expanding the number of placement options, DYRS is also focused on those youth who have unique needs that require a specialized setting. We are meeting with providers to establish new contracts and partnerships to ensure that youth who need specialized care receive it within a timely manner and in a therapeutic setting that is the best fit for their unique needs.

DYRS' behavioral health team is also developing new policies and practices that will strengthen the DYRS behavioral health service delivery and case management system. The goal of that work is to ensure that youth are assessed for and are connected to age and developmentally appropriate individualized programming and treatment efficiently and effectively.

***Strengthening Internal Monitoring and Accountability.***

The fourth strategic priority is focused on policy creation, oversight, and accountability. As leader of DYRS, I firmly believe that the agency must have clear policies and procedures in place to guide our work. I also firmly believe that we also must have systems in place to ensure those standards are followed consistently across the agency. We must strengthen DYRS internal operations to ensure that agency policies and procedures are clear, fair, supportive and lead to the delivery of high-quality services by well-trained staff within a safe environment.

To accomplish that goal, I have created the Office of Policy and Quality Assurance (OPQA). OPQA will be staffed by two Chief Policy Officers (CPO) and two quality assurance specialists. Policies and procedures are the foundation on which DYRS' operations are built. The work of the OPQA is essential and will start with the development of policies that set the standard for the quality of work across the agency. This new office will then monitor compliance with those

policies through regular audits. The office will also support the operationalization of agency policies and standards of practice. OPQA will do this through the training of current and new staff so that responsibilities and expectations are well defined, and staff are prepared and supported in their work to deliver high-quality services to our youth, both in facilities and in the community.

***Investing in Community-based Prevention and Intervention.***

The fifth strategic priority is focused on DYRS' work with youth in the community. DYRS quickly and expertly responded to address challenges regarding youth in the community on GPS supervision. In less than a year, DYRS has transformed the Abscondence Unit into a Rapid Response GPS Team. This team now has the tools and training to respond to GPS violations immediately. Doing so ensures that youth remain in compliance with GPS supervision conditions and are immediately held accountable when they are not in compliance.

DYRS also expanded access to robust community-based prevention programming through the DYRS Oasis Program. Oasis collaborates with schools and community partners to provide intensive programming to youth who are at risk of involvement with the justice system. The program was launched in spring 2023 and has already served 60 youth.

Over the past eight months, I have seen the DYRS team work hard and put in place solutions quickly. I am thankful to the DYRS for their commitment and dedication to the agency and to our youth. I know that there remains a lot of hard work ahead. As leader of DYRS, I will not shy away from that work. I commit to building a stronger DYRS so that we can support our youth and see them thrive. Moving forward, I specifically commit to focusing on the following areas of work.

- Reducing length of stay for awaiting placement youth.
- Ensuring that staff and youth are safe through sufficient staffing, stronger policies, monitoring and training.
- Expanding our continuum of care through new contracts, placements, programs, and partnerships.

I am proud of what we have already accomplished at DYRS, and I look forward to the work and progress ahead.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions and discussion.