

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AND ENGAGEMENT**



**Fiscal Year 2025
Budget Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of

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Interim Director
Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement**

**Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
Councilmember Brooke Pinto, Chairperson**

**1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
Room 500**

**May 1, 2024
12 p.m.**

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, members, and the staff of the Committee of Judiciary and Public Safety. I am Kwelli Sneed and have the privilege and honor of serving as the Interim Director of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, referred to as ONSE. I am here to discuss Mayor Muriel Bowser's proposed Fiscal Year 2025 budget for ONSE and joined today by Julia Irving, our Deputy Director of Community and Government Relations; Ta-Tanisha Wallace, our Deputy Director of Strategic Planning and Programming; Yasha Williams, our Chief Operating Officer and Interim Chief of Staff; and Anthony Iwobi, our fiscal officer, from the Office of the Chief Financial Officer.

The office's mission is to foster community-based strategies to help prevent violence and increase public safety. Our strategy is rooted in a public health approach to violence prevention because we recognize that reducing crime is not solely accomplished through law enforcement alone. ONSE has been a part of our community for six years, and after serving as Interim Director for the past year, I know the important role this office has in reducing gun violence and producing healthier communities. Our team has been working to right size our operations since May 2023, when I took on the Interim Director role after the loss of the previous ONSE Director, Linda Harllee Harper.

During the last half of fiscal year 2023 and to date in fiscal year 2024, my senior staff and I focused on improving the agency by conducting a top-to-bottom assessment of the organization that identified strengths and weaknesses to make the organization leaner, more effective, and aligned with our mission. During this time, we have hired the following positions: Chief Operating Officer, Human Resources Manager, Deputy Director for Strategic Planning and Programming, General Counsel, Deputy Director of Community and Government Affairs, and Communications Director.

In the FY25 Fair Shot Budget, Mayor Bowser has made it clear that even in the context of shared sacrifice, public safety and reducing impacts of gun violence in our community remains a top priority for continued investment. For perspective, in FY 2021, the office's budget was \$10.4 million. Currently, the office has an operating budget of \$15.4 million in local dollars and an additional \$15.4 million in federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). ARPA funding will conclude at the end of this fiscal year. With the FY25 budget, Mayor Bowser is proposing \$27.4 million in local dollars for the office to focus on Pathways, Family Support Services, and Violence Intervention that will include 88 FTEs.

Pathways

In Mayor Bowser’s Fiscal Year 2025 Fair Shot budget, the ONSE Pathways Program receives significant investment. The proposed funding will alleviate transportation barriers and hire four case managers to coordinate navigation of District government services. Over the six years of ONSE existence, 294 individuals have completed the nine-week program, and we know directly from these individuals how important Pathways is to them and their families. We know the ONSE Pathways program is essential to getting a foothold to encourage and develop safer lives and neighborhoods. Our latest Pathways Annual Report is available on our website at onse.dc.gov and details the impact we are making. With Mayor Bowser’s stated commitment to public safety, the Pathways Program ensures future cohorts of Ambassadors seeking positive changes in their lives.

Family and Survivor Support

The Family and Survivor Support Division – or FSS – serves residents of all ages that have experienced a traumatic loss or hospitalization caused by gun violence. FSS serves as the District’s response to community violence by coordinating multiple-agency emergency critical responses if a violent incident becomes a homicide, involves a juvenile being shot or stabbed or is believed to be gang or crew-related. In FY23, FSS received 703 referrals and of these, 683 requests for services were

rendered to individuals for engagement with survivors and family members of homicide. These services include burial services support and behavioral health support for adults and children. The majority of these referrals for FY23 were made for emergency or temporary hotel placement and housing-related support.

The FSS team is at the center of the after-impact of violent crime, serving as a direct link between survivors, immediate family members, and government and community-based service providers to ensure that connections are made on a host of support services. The division partnered with the D.C. Courts' Crime Victims Compensation Program to strengthen our relationship and provide a more streamlined approach to service delivery. FSS also partnered with MPD's Victim Services division to facilitate case information sharing and ensure effective and efficient service delivery to families impacted by homicide and survivors of gun violence. In FY25, we will work to ensure the FSS division can continue to serve as the connectors to government services for families impacted and triggered by gun violence.

Violence Intervention

The ONSE Violence Intervention Program is designed to work collaboratively with community-based organizations to reduce violent crime throughout the District. This program uses tactics to address potential conflicts, stabilize communities after a violent conflict, and provide support to individuals at high risk of being directly involved in violence. Further, the Mayor's commitment ensures that the work of Violence Interrupters (VIs) can continue to identify and support people at the highest risk of becoming involved in gun violence. ONSE VIs make critical connections in our priority communities. Our coordinated efforts are having a significant impact resulting in a reduction in violent crime in these areas. In FY23, 344 neighborhood mediations and ceasefires were conducted, and 471 'community touches' - or engagements - were made across the District. Violence Interrupters also attend Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) meetings to strengthen community ties and maintain open dialogue. During FY23, ONSE attended approximately 54 ANC meetings. The division participated in 77 events and activities engaging hundreds of community members and clients.

ONSE Leadership Academy

The ONSE Leadership Academy, or OLA, is remarkably successful, and I applaud the OLA staff for their consistent engagement with our youth. OLA focuses its program attention on students in middle and high school

at six priority schools, and in FY23, MacFarland Middle School was added to our roster. In FY25, OLA will transition to the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice so we can remain laser focused on reducing shootings in the District by becoming excellent at coordinating violence intervention, managing the Pathways Program, and providing critical family support services to those immediately impacted by gun violence.

In closing, ONSE serves a critical role in providing a non-law enforcement public health approach to preventing gun violence. This is difficult work, and the work becomes ever more challenging with each life we lose. But there is hope – as homicide is down 20 percent compared to this time last year, assault with dangerous weapons is down 31 percent and overall crime is down 25 percent. We must keep going.

I want to share that it has been a rewarding experience serving as Interim Director of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement. It has been an unpredictable journey with twists and turns, with a mix of great accomplishments and heartbreaking losses. Along the way, what we hope and wish for may not always develop as we had expected, as plans may involve unexpected opportunities and unforeseen paths. We've been faced with difficult challenges that, at the time, seemed insurmountable. But – in retrospect – these experiences shape who you are and who you will become. I am honored for the experience of working closely in a

space we all should care deeply about, and that's gun violence prevention.

Thank you to our community partners who have worked with us in the last year and to District residents for their continued trust in and support of our work. I also want to express my deep thanks and appreciation to the ONSE team. I am proud of your commitment and courage to work in the gun violence prevention space, and I want to thank you for serving with me this year. Together, we have laid the foundation and groundwork for the new greatness to come at the ONSE.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

