

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the Attorney General



Statement of Alexis Golden
Office of Attorney General for the District of Columbia

Before the

Committee on Government Operations and Facilities
Councilmember, Robert C. White, Jr., Chairperson

Public Hearing
B24-0865, the “Commission on Re-Entry Services for Women Amendment Act of 2022”

October 13, 2022

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman White and Councilmembers. My name is Alexis Golden, and I serve as a paralegal specialist on the Policy and Legislative Affairs team at the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia (OAG). I am before you to offer OAG's support for B24-0865, the "Commission on Re-Entry Services for Women Amendment Act of 2022." This important legislation will help ensure that women returning home from incarceration receive the services and supports they need to successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Once someone has completed their term of incarceration, they should have the opportunity to rejoin and become thriving members of their communities. Of course, we know it is not so simple. Ongoing collateral consequences of criminal convictions; effects of traumatic experiences, including the incarceration itself; and unmet medical and mental health needs often interfere with returning residents' ability to find work, establish housing, and be reunited with their children.

At the Office of Attorney General, we are committed to supporting members of our community who have previously been incarcerated. OAG works to reduce the collateral consequences of convictions, by, for example, ensuring that this vulnerable population is not targeted for scams and enforcing anti-discrimination laws that protect this community. In addition, OAG looks to this talented pool of hard-working people to help advance our mission and provide important services to the District. Cure the Streets, OAG's gun violence reduction program, relies on credible messengers to help transform their communities and change the norms around gun violence. Dozens of men and women who have previously been incarcerated now have employment through this program. OAG also supports the MORCA-Georgetown Paralegal Program, a partnership between the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens Affairs, Georgetown University, and the Department of Employment Services. The program trains returning residents to become paralegals through an intensive 20-week program. Graduates receive a certificate in paralegal studies from Georgetown and then interview with law offices in the DC area for full-time paralegal positions. OAG is one of those offices, and I am a graduate of that program. In my class of ten, OAG hired three of us. OAG has hired more graduates of this program than any other single employer. Thanks to the Council's generous support, OAG will grow its hiring from the program even further in 2023. This program is an excellent example of the kind of program the District should be doing more of.

This paralegal program has had an enormous impact on my life. While I was working to obtain my paralegal certificate, the program was incredibly supportive of the unique needs of the students. I feel like the intensity of the program was like the pressure cooker of chrysalis, and we turned into butterflies. And I've never seen a butterfly turn back into a caterpillar. The additional education allowed me to get a well-paying job at OAG. Housing and job security, once constant worries, no longer weigh on me. I am forever grateful to the program. It gave me an amazing new outlook and perspective on life. I feel hopeful.

Chairman White, I know you know this program well, because you have been one of its leading supporters. When you spoke at my graduation, you said that you are proud of us, and that you could not wait to see all the things that we accomplish. I am so proud to be speaking before you today and using the skills and experience I learned in the program and at OAG to help improve policy in the District of Columbia, to make a difference for women who need a second chance.

Formerly Incarcerated Women have Unique Needs

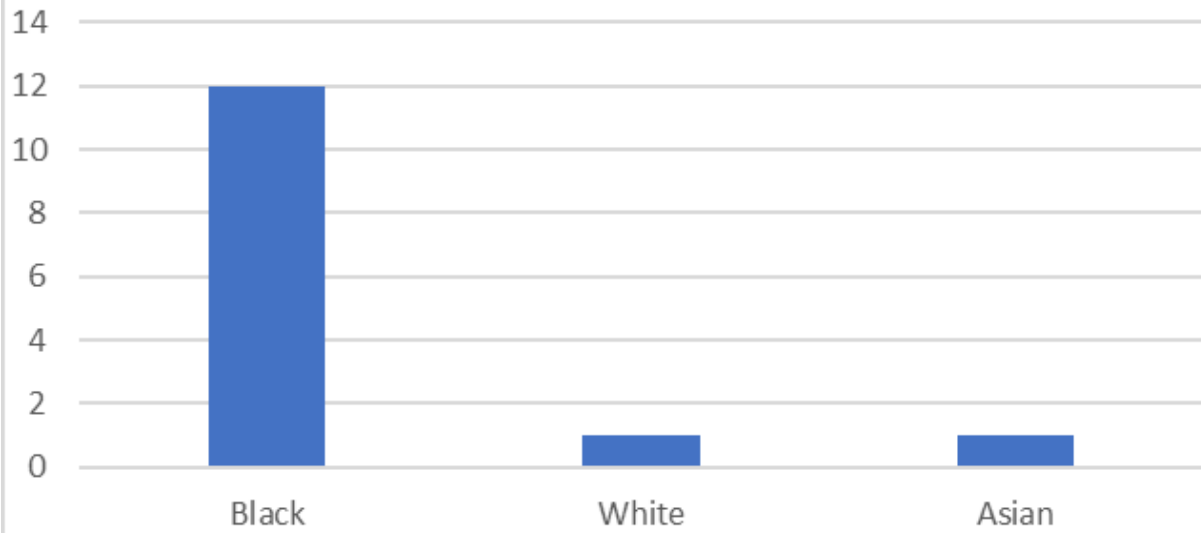
To help meet the needs of returning residents, the Council established the Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizen Affairs and tasked it with making recommendations to promote the welfare, empowerment, and reintegration of returning residents through employment and workforce development, health care, education, housing, and social services. This is an important program. People returning to the District from long periods of incarceration in the Bureau of Prisons face heightened challenges because their distance from home isolated them from their family and community. Additionally, the lack of affordable housing and displacement of members of their communities exacerbate the challenges of returning home. The existing Commission is designed to help returning residents meet these needs, but significant challenges remain. And, in part because people returning home to the District from incarceration overwhelmingly are men,¹ the program's services and recommendations often do not address the unique needs of formerly incarcerated women.

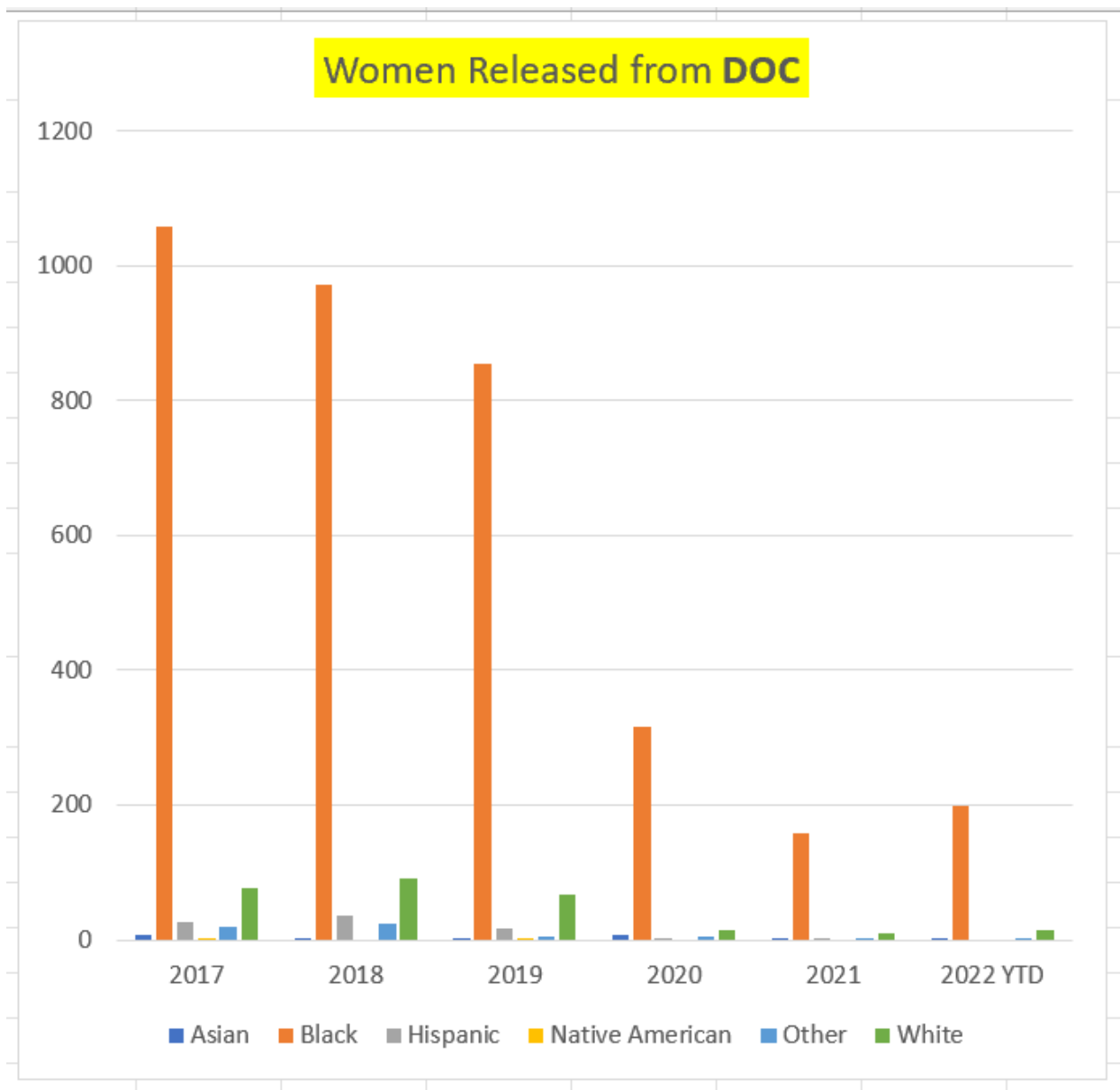
Although women represent a small proportion of the people returning home from incarceration, the numbers are nevertheless significant. In 2019, for example, 951 women were released from a Department of Corrections (DOC) facility into the community. Between January 1 and October 6, 2022, 216 women were released from a DOC facility into the community. This number is significantly smaller than in years before the pandemic. So far this year, 14 women who were serving time for convictions for DC Code offenses were released from Bureau of Prisons (BOP) facilities. Most of the women returning home are Black. Of the 216 women released from DOC this year, 200 of them were black. Twelve of the 14 women released from BOP were Black.²

¹ From January 1, 2022 through October 1, 2022, 14 women convicted of DC Code offenses were released from BOP facilities, as compared to 637 men. Women represent less than one percent of the average daily population at Department of Corrections facilities. See DC Department of Corrections Facts and Figures July 2022, available at <https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/DC%20Department%20of%20Corrections%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20July%202022.pdf>.

² The Office of Attorney General is grateful to the District Task Force on Jails and Justice, the DC Corrections Information Council, and the DC Department of Corrections for providing the data that underlies the analysis in this testimony.

Women Released from **BOP** 2022 YTD





Women who have been incarcerated have unique experiences prior to incarceration, are subject to different harms while incarcerated, and have different needs upon release. For example, women who commit crimes are more likely than men to have co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders, and are more likely to have histories of trauma, including childhood abuse.³ Nationwide data also demonstrates that most incarcerated women have at least one child under the age of 18, and are much more likely than incarcerated men to have sole custody of their children and plan to resume their parenting role following release.⁴ While all formerly incarcerated people have higher

³ “Female Reentry and Gender Responsive Programming, Recommendations for Policy and Practice,” Holly Ventura Miller, May 19, 2021, National Institute of Justice, available at <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/female-reentry-and-gender-responsive-programming>

⁴ *Id.*

rates of unemployment than the general population, formerly incarcerated Black women have much higher rates of unemployment than other formerly incarcerated people.⁵

Because formerly incarcerated women have different needs than formerly incarcerated men, we must provide programming that is responsive to these different needs. Safe and stable housing, for example, is particularly important for women immediately following release to reduce the need to rely on abusive relationships to meet basic needs.⁶ For women who have substance abuse disorders, immediate intervention upon release is particularly important to reduce the risk of overdose, which is higher for women than for men.⁷ Research also shows that services should include, for example, screening instruments for substance use and psychiatric disorders that have been designed specifically for women; gender-informed substance abuse interventions, such as group-based therapy and the use of peer recovery specialists; and family housing supports.⁸ Gender informed re-entry plans also should include a consideration of, for example, housing that will offer protection from prior abusive relationships; legal support to obtain or maintain child custody; parenting education; domestic violence or intimate partner violence interventions; and childcare.⁹

This national research tracks my personal experience. Although I was detained for only a short period, I needed supports to succeed, as did the other women in my program. I am a mother, as were all the other women in my cohort. While I was in the paralegal program, which met five days a week, I also worked at a local coffee shop. Through that job, I was able to get affordable, safe childcare for my daughter. The paralegal program supported me to attend and succeed in school while providing me the flexibility that I needed to care for my daughter. I also had the opportunity to get to know other women in the program, who shared that their greatest needs were assistance with obtaining secure housing and employment and educational assistance to allow them to support themselves and their children. Women who were incarcerated want to be able to care for themselves and their families without engaging in wrongdoing. Like me, these women work hard. What they need is support and an opportunity to be judged on their merit.

⁵ “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people,” Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, July 2018, Prison Policy Initiative, available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html#appendix>.

⁶ “After Incarceration: A Guide to Helping Women Reenter the Community, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,” available at https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA_Digital_Download/PEP20-05-01-001_508.pdf

⁷ “Reducing overdose after release from incarceration (ROAR): study protocol for an intervention to reduce risk of fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose among women after release from prison,” Elizabeth Needham Waddell, Robin Baker, Daniel M. Hartung, Christi J. Hildebran, Thuan Nguyen, Deza’Rae M. Collins, Jessica E. Larsen, Erin Stack, and the ROAR Protocol Development Team, December 8, 2020, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7349469/>

⁸ “Female Reentry and Gender Responsive Programming, Recommendations for Policy and Practice,” Holly Ventura Miller, May 19, 2021, National Institute of Justice, available at <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/female-reentry-and-gender-responsive-programming>

⁹ “After Incarceration: A Guide to Helping Women Reenter the Community, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,” available at https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA_Digital_Download/PEP20-05-01-001_508.pdf

This legislation will help ensure that women returning from incarceration will receive gender-responsive and trauma-informed care that will support them to rebuild their lives. It would create a Commission on Re-Entry Services for Women that parallels the Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizen Affairs but focused on the needs of women. The Commission will identify gender-responsive and evidence-based practices that correctional facilities and community-based providers should consider in supporting women who are returning citizens; identify specific services that address the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges women face prior, during, and after incarceration; and examine workforce development, education, and housing opportunities that are tailored to returning women. Membership on the commission will include people with expertise in the needs of formerly incarcerated women, including women who have themselves been previously incarcerated, and someone who has experience with LGBTQIA and re-entry issues. This is a thoughtful approach that will help ensure that the hundreds of women who return home from incarceration each year receive services that are gender-responsive and trauma-informed.

Around the nation, insufficient resources have been dedicated to developing and providing services that meet the distinct needs of women returning home from incarceration. Most of these women must rely on a small number of non-profit organizations, often run by formerly incarcerated women themselves, to assist them when they come home. Here in the District, for example, OAG's friend Lashonia Thomson-El—who helped develop and implement our Cure the Street Program—runs the WIRE, a network of formerly incarcerated women who provide peer support and peer advocacy to women in prison and women returning from incarceration. Increasingly, however, jurisdictions are realizing that dedicated funding and support is needed to ensure these women and their children can be successful.¹⁰ Passing the legislation and implementing the recommendations the Commission makes will make the District a leader in this important effort.

Conclusion

Thank you for holding this hearing on this important bill and for the opportunity to testify. I am proud of the work OAG has done to support returning residents and to help them succeed. I am thankful for the opportunity I have been given to help support OAG's work, and I'm grateful that the Council is considering legislation that will help ensure women returning from incarceration have the services and supports they need; to secure stable housing; to obtain and keep a good job that will allow them to support themselves and their families; and to meet their medical and behavioral health needs.

¹⁰Pennsylvania, for example, recently announced the launch of a Women's Reentry Services Initiative Program, <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-wolf-first-lady-announce-opening-of-2-million-program-supporting-successful-womens-reentry/>.