



DC Action for Children

Statement for the Record
***Implementation of the Mayor's Youth
Development Plan***

**Submitted to the
Special Committee on the Prevention of Youth Violent Crime,
Councilmember Vincent Gray, Chair**

**By
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DC Action for Children, the District's only multi-issue advocacy organization dedicated to improving conditions for children, youth and their families, is pleased to have this opportunity to comment on the implementation of Mayor Williams' effective youth development strategy. DC Action for Children has been involved in the development of the strategy since its inception and has supported the progress made. Yet we believe that there are a number of outstanding issues that must be addressed as the implementation of programming continues:

- Accountability mechanism
- Policy development
- Outcomes and performance measures

Accountability mechanism

Let me start by stating that DC Action for Children believes that **the responsibility – and ergo the accountability mechanism – for the youth development strategy rests with the government.** Let me repeat this: Policy, planning and implementation of the strategy is the sole responsibility of the government. As such, responsibility and accountability cannot be shifted to an outside organization or agency.

As we have stated before, leadership at the very top of government is required to improve conditions for youth. Just as Mayor Williams has championed economic development and bringing baseball back to the District, he and his successors must make youth a top priority with the full force of the government behind the effort. This may or may not be accomplished by the structures mentioned in the strategy (the possible creation of a cabinet-level Office of Youth Development or the restructuring of a current agency administration. (p. 35) Both ideas deserve further scrutiny to assess what is best to meet the goals. As of today, we have not been a part of a meaningful discussion other than with members of the City Council.

The existence of an accountability mechanism will result in better collaboration and coordination of agency services precisely because the buck will stop with one person. This person will be responsible for developing public policies and/or rules, developing service standards and ensuring resource equity. Currently, there is really no one single place in government that does these important things for youth.

We applaud your initiative, Mr. Gray, on this issue, with the amendment to the Budget Support Act we expect you to introduce on July 11. This amendment will do what the executive has thus far failed to do.

Policy development

A glaring omission in the strategy and its current implementation is a discussion of the role of public policy. After all, only the government can implement public policies and public policies are the foundation upon which the city can build an ambitious, goal-oriented and youth-friendly youth development strategy. This is why we said in our testimony one year ago, "It is not sufficient that we have laws on the books that are designed to protect and nurture children to age 5 – we must do the same for older children and youth."

Currently, the city is working on the following public policy issues:

- *Updated child development facility regulations:* Pursuant to a 1998 law, the regulations are being updated to include out-of-school time (OST) programs for older children and teens. The regulations will have an impact on OST programs and we believe that basic standards are important and useful.
- *Outcomes for youth:* While the current PBB structure does not include outcomes, a number of government child- and youth-related programs already collect outcomes information. The government-wide institution of such measures is essential if policymakers, advocates and the public are to determine the effectiveness of financial investments.
- *Expanding school mental health:* In FY 2006, the city will have mental health programs in 46 public and public charter schools. Of these, 14 are new in FY 2006. Adding staff to the Department of Mental Health would allow DMH, DCPS and DCPCS to bring on additional schools at a faster pace.

Other public policies the District could (we believe should) consider are:

- *Requiring standards for out-of-school time programs:* Currently, the Children and Youth Investment Trust Corp. has standards that are optional for their grantees. There is some degree of agreement that with improved indicators, the standards should be mandatory for all government operated and funded programs.
- *Background check implementation and enforcement:* Not long ago, the city implemented legislation that required criminal background checks for classes of people working/volunteering with children and youth. There appears to be little concern with enforcement of the provisions of the law and we have become aware that non-profits, under contract with DC government agencies, are being wholesale exempted from the background check requirements. This is contrary to the letter and intent of the law.
- *Ensuring that older youth reach adulthood healthy, safe and well adjusted:* Achieving this goal requires that the city clearly articulate how it intends to achieve the goal – including programming and budget details.
- *Youth employment:* It might also be useful for the city to think about the youth employment issue from the perspective of household income and poverty. That is, it seems to us that an important question to ask and answer is “Why is it that so many young people **need** to work?” Do young people need to work to raise the household income? If the answer is yes, then the city has a bigger problem than youth employment and unemployment.
- *Redistribution of resources:* As an Urban Institute study found in the late 1990s, the majority of out-of-school time programs were located in the center of the District. This is odd given the youth population east of the river. Other research suggests that other services and population patterns are the same. We suggest that it is a reasonable and acceptable goal of public policy to place resources where the need is. As such, we recommend that additional resources should be placed in currently under-resourced communities.

Outcomes and performance measures

As we have said before, we believe strongly that outcome measures must be implemented. These measures are needed for two reasons. First, the measures will tell us the value of the funding and specific intervention on children and youth. Second, the measures will tell us about how efficiently the funds are being used.

While some discussions have taken place about what outcome measures should be used, to my knowledge we are no closer to selecting and implementing them than we were a year ago. To move the discussion forward, DC ACT has started our "outcomes project", an effort to solicit input from local and national experts on DC-appropriate measures in the six city-wide goals. This week, we distributed to a list of experts some sample outcomes and instructions and hope to get feedback from them by the end of July. It is our expectation that these experts will recommend outcome measures that reflect policy and program work in place in the city and that can be implemented within the next 24 months. As soon as the document is finished, you will receive a copy. Others, including the city's appointed leaders, will also receive the outcome recommendations with the strong suggestion to implement some in FY 2008.

Evaluation is the natural next step of measuring outcomes and something that the District must do if we are truly serious about improving the lives of children and youth. We are interested in learning more about the plans of the DM for Children, Youth, Families and Elders in this regard.

Conclusion

Mr. Gray and members of the special committee, we hope that our comments have been helpful. We hope that the public reiteration of the shortcomings and our recommendations will one day be fixed and implemented, respectively.