



CIC | DC Corrections Information Council

COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA Committee on the Judiciary – Performance Oversight Hearings March 2, 2017

Testimony of Michelle Bonner, Executive Director Corrections Information Council

Good afternoon, Chairman Allen and other members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety.

I am Michelle Bonner, the Executive Director of the DC Corrections Information Council, commonly known as the “CIC.” Board members Charles Thornton, Katharine Huffman and Phylisa Carter join me in thanking you for the opportunity to share with you and the community the work we have done in fiscal year 2016 and in fiscal year 2017 to date.

As you know, the CIC is an independent monitoring body initially established under the 1997 Revitalization Act, with its mandate further expanded and detailed in the DC Jail Improvement Act of 2003. The CIC is mandated to inspect, monitor, and report on the conditions of confinement in the prisons, jails, and halfway houses where DC residents are incarcerated. This includes about 4,900 residents in 116 Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) facilities and contract facilities in 34 states and the District of Columbia, as well as 1,869 residents in the custody of the DC Department of Corrections (DOC).

The CIC first consisted of a volunteer board of three from 2002 to 2005, but it did not have access to BOP facilities, no accessible funding, and no fulltime staff support. From 2006 to 2012 there was no volunteer board and no government support to establish it. The CIC board was re-established in 2012, and in August 2012, the CIC hired its first program analyst, Cara Comani, who faithfully served the CIC for 3 ½ years.

Since before 2012, the CIC and advocates for the agency have stressed that our mandate extends beyond mere inspection of bricks and mortar to include assessments of programs and services available to D.C. residents at over 100 facilities, as well as the policies and procedures that govern them. We examine medical and mental health treatment, substance abuse programs, education and training programs. We also examine grievance procedures and disciplinary policies, visitation procedures, and prerelease planning. D.C. residents in BOP custody are far from their homes, and families. They face unique obstacles in maintaining community connections and reentering the community upon completion of their sentences. The CIC’s oversight role includes reporting on these unique obstacles and making recommendations to remove these unique barriers to reentry.

The CIC sees its role as the eyes and ears for the D.C. Mayor, Council, community members, and families of incarcerated D.C. residents. We hoped to provide transparency, oversight, knowledge, and systematic monitoring of the facilities that incarcerate our residents here in D.C. and across the U.S. In performance of this function, the CIC has:

- Inspected 40 BOP facilities and contract facilities, as well as the DOC facilities, (DC Jail and Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF));
- Published 22 comprehensive inspection reports, 13 of which were published in FY16 and FY17 to date;
- Responded to hundreds of letters and inquiries from incarcerated DC residents and their loved ones;
- Attended dozens of community events, including participation in CSOSA's quarterly Community Resource Day Videoconferences;
- Met with the leadership of the BOP about our findings and recommendations; and
- Met with the DC DOC on many occasions regarding concerns voiced by DC residents in DOC facilities and by community members.

Throughout, it has been our goal to provide information and insight that advocates, government officials, decision-makers, and corrections agencies can use to improve the conditions of confinement for incarcerated DC residents.

Since the CIC became an independent government agency with increased capacity in FY 2016, the agency has made great strides in managing the challenges mentioned in last year's Performance Oversight Hearing.

- The increase from one to three program analyst positions has enabled the CIC to decrease its backlog of inspection reports, by publishing 13 inspection reports in FY16 and FY17 to date.
- The CIC now has a full board of three volunteer members.
- The MOU executed in July 2013 for the first time institutionalized CIC's regular access to BOP facilities. The CIC and BOP renewed the MOU for announced BOP facility inspections conducted by the CIC for another three years, from July 21, 2016 to July 20, 2019.

In addition, the CIC embarked on the following activities in FY2016 and into FY2017:

- Strategic Planning – In FY 2016, the CIC engaged the services of AJ Robinson, of Symphonic Strategies, to facilitate strategic planning. We developed a road map for our work, with input from decision-makers, community advocates, the CIC board, and staff. We have since employed a new way of strategizing and prioritizing our work to meet our goals of information sharing and to develop our expertise in the corrections oversight arena.
- Data Management System – In FY16 the CIC entered into negotiations with, and in FY17 the CIC has contracted with OCTO to develop a data management system, to better collect and analyze data collected from prior and future inspections, correspondence, interviews, and research. This database development is funded by a Byrne JAG grant, administered by the Office of Victim Services/Justice Grants (OVSJG).

- Pop-Up Think Tanks – The CIC has developed this outreach vehicle as a new way of gathering information from stakeholders, even as stakeholders together develop proposed solutions to challenges affecting incarcerated DC residents. The CIC facilitated two “Pop-Up Think Tanks” in FY 2016 (one on “Family Engagement” and one on “Reimagining CTF”, the DOC assumption of CTF operations), and plans to hold future pop-up think tanks in the coming years.
- Thematic Reports – In addition to generating facility inspection reports and think tank reports, the CIC has embarked on producing thematic reports that evaluate systems that are in place in multiple facilities, thereby generating an impact on behalf of DC residents in more facilities than we are able to visit in person. The CIC is currently researching the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing incarcerated DC residents, and experiences of LGBTQ justice-involved persons in DC criminal justice system.
- Other Information Sharing – The CIC has increased its social media presence and has produced four bulletins highlighting issues related to corrections and reentry. We will continue this effort, and will expand our use of different communications tools in order to increase dissemination of information to the community beyond the publication of inspection reports.
- Outreach to Incarcerated DC Residents – In FY 2016, as a result of the “Family Engagement” think tank, the CIC held a writing event at Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ in Ward 8 for people to send hand-made cards to their incarcerated loved ones. This past December, we expanded outreach efforts by enlisting volunteers and community partners to write individual holiday post cards to over 4000 DC residents incarcerated in BOP facilities across the country.
- 2017 DC Prisoner and Reentry Symposium – The CIC has partnered with the Public Defender Service Community Defender Division and has invited other community partners and stakeholders to participate in the 2017 DC Prisoner and Reentry Symposium, to be held on Friday, March 10, at UDC David A. Clarke School of Law. This is another opportunity for the CIC to both share and receive information about issues of critical importance to incarcerated DC residents.

While the CIC endeavors to try more ways to both collect and share information with policy makers, corrections agencies, those currently and formerly incarcerated, and the community, its primary concern is its mandate: to inspect and monitor correctional facilities where DC residents are incarcerated. The CIC is excited about the changes within DOC, particularly related to its assumption of operations in the Correctional Treatment Facility. In years past, the CIC has maintained an informal relationship with DOC, but in FY2016 and FY2017, the CIC has attempted to formalize this relationship by requesting data and attempting quarterly meetings and regular visits to DOC facilities. The CIC is still in negotiations to receive data from DOC for FY16; and we plan to visit CTF in late March or early April, after things have settled from the February 1st transfer.

The CIC is also working to maintain its relationship with BOP, along with continued access to BOP facilities and BOP review and response to CIC reports. At present, BOP has an acting director, but the BOP anticipates changes in leadership under the new federal

administration soon. The Bureau has honored its MOU with the CIC for announced inspections for the past three years and has renewed the MOU for three more. The CIC hopes that this relationship has been institutionalized and will continue unchanged or, better yet, strengthened with changes in BOP administration.

The CIC is proud to work on behalf of the people of the District, and to play an important role in the continuous information-gathering, evaluation, and improvement that are so important to ensuring public safety and justice for our city. As noted by Professor Michele Deitch, a corrections oversight expert at the University of Texas who has written about the many forms of corrections oversight and teaches specifically about the type of oversight that the CIC conducts, the independent, external inspection and monitoring the CIC performs is the only type intended to be preventative in nature. “Monitoring is not about blame for past mistakes, it is about preventing occurrences in the future and about improving the current state of the correctional facilities.”¹ This is the goal of the CIC. This is the goal that we stress to every policy maker, every corrections agency leader, every facility warden, and every person we engage. Our mission is to help improve and maintain high standards in conditions of confinement. We thank you for the resources and support to fulfill this mission.

¹ Deitch, Michele, “Distinguishing the Various Functions of Effective Prison Oversight,” 30 Pace L. Rev. 1438, 1443 (2010).