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Contact: Diane.Shinn@dc.gov, 202-727-8991

New report: NEAR Act Programs Can & Should Be Strengthened
Audit sees mixed results in public health approach to curbing violence

June 7, 2022 (WASHINGTON) While core public health provisions of D.C.'s NEAR Act—to build government capacity and create promising practices to reduce violence—have been implemented as intended, at least two mandates in the landmark legislation have been ignored, according to a new report by the Office of the D.C. Auditor.

“The Bowser Administration’s failure to fully comply with the law has marred otherwise notable achievements,” said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson.

Enacted by the Council in 2016, the Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results (NEAR) Act was a comprehensive blueprint for a public health approach to criminal justice reform in the District. ODCA reviewed the implementation and impacts of the NEAR Act to see if the law was implemented as intended and what impacts could be demonstrated from its first five years.

“The good news is that structures and services are in place that did not exist when the Council enacted this law,” Patterson said. “The challenge is to build on new program models, make them stronger, continue measuring, and keep improving.”

The law required the creation of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE) and ODCA found that ONSE is deploying violence interrupters to high crime communities and its Pathways program is reaching the target group of individuals at risk of being victims or perpetrators of violence. The law also required significant expansion in the D.C.’s Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program (HVIP), which now ranks as the first citywide publicly funded HVIP in the nation, connecting victims of violence with services from the hospital bedside.

D.C. Councilmember Charles Allen, chair of the Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary, noted that the Fiscal Year 2023 budget approved by the D.C. Council supports expansions in NEAR Act programs with a 19% increase in the ONSE budget—\$9.7 million for additional violence interrupters and \$7.5 million for the Pathways program, including enhanced wages for its participants. “We’re providing significant and strategic investments in public-health based approaches to community safety,” he said.

The report also found that two NEAR Act initiatives to promote a public health approach to preventing violence have not been implemented: the establishment of an Office of Violence Prevention and Health Equity within DC Health, and the creation by the Metropolitan Police Department and the Department of Behavioral Health of police officer-clinician teams to respond to behavioral health crises.

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The report stops short of declaring success in reducing violence, however, and recommends that a criminal justice research organization evaluate the violence interrupter programs operated by ONSE and the Office of the Attorney General by simulating a randomized control trial that compares program sites with similar communities not in the program and identifying the most effective aspects of each program to serve as the basis for a possible merger.

ODCA found stark differences in resource allocation between the two violence interruption programs: the ONSE program sometimes assigned only one part-time or full-time violence interrupter per community served, whereas the OAG program deployed staff and funding much more intensively.

Other ODCA recommendations include:

- ONSE should use additional funds to increase not only the number of VI sites, but also the number of violence interrupters working in each community.
- The Metropolitan Police Department and the Department of Behavioral Health should establish the joint community crime prevention teams required by the NEAR Act.
- ONSE should track and report post-program employment and victimization data for Pathways graduates.
- D.C. Council should shift the duty to develop and implement a public health strategy to the City Administrator and specify Level 1 and 2 trauma center hospitals as the target sites for HVIP.

This report is the first in a series of reports, part of a discretionary audit included in ODCA's fiscal year 2021 audit plan.

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