

Council of the District of Columbia John A. Wilson Building 1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Washington, DC 20004

JANEESE LEWIS GEORGE Ward 4 Councilmember Chair of the Committee on Facilities and Family Services

COMMITTEE MEMBER

Committee on Transportation and the Environment Committee on Executive Administration and Labor Committee on Public Works and Operations

March 14, 2024 The Honorable Muriel Bowser Mayor of the District of Columbia John A. Wilson Building 1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my priorities for the Fiscal Year 2025 budget for Ward 4 and the District of Columbia. When I begin thinking about the District's budget every year, I go to the best source I know for input – the people of Ward 4.

My priorities for the FY25 budget have been informed by conversations and testimony during recent agency oversight hearings, Community Access, Resource & Engagement (CARE) days, Listen As We Climb listening sessions, engagement with Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, service providers, and community advocates who love the District and are invested in making it better for themselves and future generations. These are the people who use government services, care about their neighbors, and look to us to make good decisions about spending their hard-earned tax dollars.

My priorities are centered around three core themes I heard from our residents: investing in housing and health, investing in our educators and our youth, and investing in public safety and community needs.

Investing in Housing and Health

- 1. Housing is a human right and must be a priority in the FY25 budget. Access to safe and affordable housing is critical in addressing issues related to truancy, public safety, and the future of DC. The Comeback Plan will leave a lot of DC residents behind unless we do more to assist and protect residents from rising rents, predatory landlords, and displacement. I am asking that you fund the following:
 - \$100 million for emergency rental assistance. ERAP is a vital resource to many residents and the very fact that the portal is forced to close hours to days after opening shows that there is an urgent need to adequately fund the program.

- Invest in non-congregate shelter and storage for unhoused individuals. As Chair of the Committee on Facilities and Family Services, I visited some of the congregate shelters and saw the inadequate facility conditions that many of our residents are living in. These unacceptable conditions are also the reason some opt to sleep on the street rather than going into shelter. When the street is a better option than a shelter, we have failed. We must improve congregate shelter conditions immediately. During my visits, I also saw the critical need for storage due to overcrowding, limited space, and lack of privacy and ask that you make provision of storage part of this investment.
- 2. **\$173.2 million to fully fund Give Snap A Raise to 2027.** 141,000 DC residents depend on SNAP to feed themselves and support their families. Last year, just when people were starting to recover from the pandemic, Congress reduced these critical benefits. I've heard from Ward 4 residents and those throughout the District who say they often run out of food one or two weeks into the month when their benefits are reduced. The temporary increase is easing that burden, but it doesn't solve the problem. No one should have to miss meals or ration their food while living in one of the wealthiest cities in the nation. Fully funding Give SNAP A Raise at least eases some of the burden our vulnerable residents face.
- 3. Fund the Direct Care Worker Amendment Act of 2023. Direct Care Workers should not be underpaid or undervalued when they are providing essential services to our loved ones. We are facing a crisis-level shortage of direct care workers. Ensuring they are paid at least 120% of the District's living wage is a first and important step to ensuring we have enough of them to provide critical care to residents who rely on them for their health and wellbeing.
- 4. **Fund Hiring Incentives for Social Workers**. There is a national shortage of social workers and the District is feeling it as much as every other state. Social workers face excessive caseloads, long hours, and burnout, and it's causing many of them to leave this crucial profession. The end result is that people who rely on social workers are left to navigate complex systems and problems on their own or with a social worker who is too busy or too tired to properly serve them. The District must set the example that we value our social workers by offering incentives to attract new qualified and licensed social workers, as we do with other critical but difficult to fill positions. The end result will be a productive workforce and vulnerable residents who are receiving the care they desperately need.
- 5. **Fund No Senior Hungry.** Over 5 million seniors in the United States were food insecure in 2020 and in our District, one in nine seniors do not have enough to eat. We need to use all the tools we have to keep our seniors well-nourished and fully fund legislation that was passed with unanimous support from Council.
- 6. **Increase Funding for Senior Villages.** Senior Villages are one of the District's most critical and effective initiatives for helping our seniors thrive. Villages, such Ward 4's East Rock Creek Village and Northwest Neighbors Village, are a cost-effective and community-based way to enable seniors to remain in the neighborhoods they have lived in for decades and connect with resources and services that promote their health, safety, and well-being. The District should increase funding to our villages to guarantee that every senior who wants to live in a village can do so.

- 7. Expand Hattie Holmes Senior Wellness Center. As participation in our outstanding senior centers returns to pre-pandemic levels, our seniors need more resources, more programming, and even more space. The great Hattie Holmes Senior Wellness Center's ability to serve the rising number of seniors is being limited by the amount of space currently available. Ward 4 seniors need and deserve an expanded senior center. The Department of Aging and Community Living should renovate the second floor of the center and install an elevator to enable our Ward 4 seniors to take full advantage of the facility.
- 8. Fund The Expansion of The Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Subsidy Programs. Relatives, and especially grandparents, are the key to providing the District's youth with safe, stable, and nurturing environments when parents are unable to do so. Many of our grandparents and relatives are stepping up for our kids, but the District is currently not doing enough to support them in return. By expanding the income threshold of these programs from 200% of the federal poverty level to 300%, the District can provide more of our hero grandparents and relatives with resources to help them help our young people enjoy their childhood in a familiar home with all of the resources they need.
- 9. Expand Government Accessibility. Every District resident has the right to have knowledge of and participate in District governance. Unfortunately, this right is not a reality for far too many District residents with disabilities—especially those who are Deaf, DeafBlind, Deaf Disabled, Late Deafened, and Hard of Hearing. The capacity of the Mayor's Office of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing should be expanded to enable the agency to administer the Council's Effective Communication Program to ensure that the official activities of the Council are as accessible as possible.
- 10. Provide a one-time \$500,000 grant for the preservation of Hampshire Gardens. Hampshire Gardens is a Ward 4 housing cooperative that has made homeownership a reality for many District residents. As the historic property and its residents age, the property has fallen into disrepair and many of the aging and lower income residents cannot afford contribute to the much-needed improvements to the infrastructure. This small, one-time funding would allow the cooperative to fund brick repointing, stormwater management, and related repairs. These repairs would also improve the overall aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood, as Hampshire Gardens is a prominently visible DC Historic Landmark.

Investing in our Educators and Youth

1. Add Capacity Near Whittier Elementary School for Swing Space and Relieve Nearby Crowding. Whittier Elementary School's overdue modernization will begin in school year 2025-26, meaning students and staff will be learning in temporary swing space for two years. DCPS' current plan is for Whittier to occupy the former Sharpe Health Campus on 13th Street, over two miles away from Whittier. That distance is likely to cause enrollment declines and staff turnover as families depart what would otherwise be a neighborhood school. Simultaneously, students at Ida B. Wells Middle School and Coolidge High School, who share a building across the street from Whittier, are experiencing severe overcrowding. Last year Ida B. Wells was at 119% utilization and Coolidge was at 125% utilization – two of the top five most crowded schools in the city. We can solve both problems by either constructing a temporary modular campus on District-owned land near Whittier, Wells, and Coolidge, or leasing/purchasing another building nearby. This additional

capacity can be used first as proximate swing space for Whittier and then space to relieve overcrowding at Wells and Coolidge – supporting our Ward 4 neighborhood schools and community.

- 2. Restore Funding Cuts to DCPS Initial School Budgets. The Council passed the "Schools First in Budgeting Amendment Act" in 2022 to help promote stability and predictable school-level budgets. Unfortunately, initial budgets for schools this fall include harmful cuts, primarily in the form of lost buying power. This will lead to deep cuts in staffing. Some schools, like Lafayette Elementary School, have projected enrollment increases, and yet are seeing budget decreases, which are then amplified by increased costs for teachers. Our teachers deserve their recent pay increase, and I support efforts to sign a new contract for this year and the future. We must also provide sufficient funding to school principals so they can deliver the programming and supports necessary to achieve academic recovery after the COVID 19 pandemic.
- 3. **Expand Safe Passage.** Without a dedicated school bus system, the District has left many families and youth having to navigate getting to and from school on their own. According to the Safe Passage Interactive map, of the 30 schools in Ward 4, only five are currently included in the Safe Passage program. I regularly hear from Ward 4 parents and students about improving safety for our students. I ask that you expand Safe Passage to more schools, especially to DC International (DCI) Public Charter School, which is the only high school in the District that does not currently have Safe Passage support. Last year, students were assaulted and robbed multiple times outside of DCI and they need our help to keep them safe.
- 4. **Fund Permanent Substitute Teachers for all DCPS and DC public charter schools.** While we continue to work to recover the losses experienced during the pandemic, our schools, educators, and students have not yet fully recovered. Permanent substitute teachers are critical to addressing short staffing and will help to provide a stable environment for our students.
- 5. Invest at least \$2 million to fund the demand for flexible scheduling for our educators. The District cannot continue to expect progress in schools while ignoring the thousands of hard-working, dedicated educators. They have spoken loudly about the need for flexible scheduling. We need to listen to them when they share their needs and take the necessary action so they can remain in our schools and with our students.
- 6. Fund student loan relief for educators. We know hiring more diverse teachers in our schools can improve outcomes for Black and Brown students. Yet many of our talented educators have limited opportunities due to student loan debt. 91 percent of Black students who were trained to teach took out federal student loans compared to only 76 percent of their white counterparts. Student loan debt is a hindrance to many students who want to become educators and the weight of that debt often forces them out of the profession. Our students learn better and grow more when they are exposed to diverse classrooms. Reducing the burden of student loan debt helps all of our students as much as it does our teachers.
- 7. **Expand Out of School Time Programming.** We are all concerned about the shocking level of crimes that are being committed by the District's young people. That's just one of the many reasons we must invest more in our Out of School Time programs. Quality programming after school and on weekends is as critical to a child's education as the time they spend in the classroom. I heard this

from parents, educators, and the community at my Listen As We Climb events. We must increase funding for these programs as part of our overall effort to lower crime rates among our young people.

- 8. Retain the School Connect program at LaSalle-Backus Elementary School and Ida B. Wells Middle School. The fiscal year 2024 budget included funding for a Department of For Hire Vehicles School Connect route between LaSalle-Backus Elementary School and Ida B. Wells Middle School. Students living in the Lamond-Riggs community of Wards 4 and 5 do not have a direct or safe route from home to their neighborhood middle school, Ida B. Wells. This program is particularly important for students who are often late or even absent because they must accompany their younger siblings to school before their own classes start. The recently opened School Connect program helps eliminate this gap for a select number of students and families identified by each school's administrators most in need of support. We must continue this Safe Passage investment.
- 9. **\$5 million for School Safety Directors for all high schools.** There have been numerous instances where I found myself coordinating with MPD, Principals, educators, parents, students, and neighbors right after a security breach near our schools and have had to communicate information to concerned parents and the broader community. We need a better system and more safety support for our schools and having a dedicated school safety director will help with better communication and coordination.
- 10. **Invest in our children and families by increasing the District Child Tax Credit.** I co-introduced the District Child Tax Credit Amendment Act of 2023 with Councilmember Zachary Parker and I fully support increasing the refundable credit. The District has the ability to lessen the financial hardships and income disparities for many families through this increase.
- 11. **\$25 million to fund the School-based behavioral health program.** The District is not immune to the nation's youth mental health crisis, yet our young people continue to face major barriers to accessing the care that they need and deserve. While the School-Based Behavioral Health Program (SBBH) is designed to remove those barriers by embedding dedicated professionals in every DC school, lack of sufficient resources has inhibited the program from reaching its full potential of helping every student who needs it when they need it. Significant additional investment is necessary to sustain compensation for SBBH's community-based clinicians, develop guidance for and compensate the SBBH Coordinator role, and establish a pilot program to add non-clinical staff positions to SBBH teams.
- 12. Increase Funding for Collaboratives. For years, the District has required our collaboratives to do more with less. Collaboratives are now charged with connecting families who call the 211 Warmline with resources to help keep kids out of the foster care system, but no additional funding was allocated for this service. We must increase funding to Collaboratives to cover the cost of these additional responsibilities. The Warmline cannot and will not succeed if Collaboratives can't afford to provide help for those who ask for it.

Clean, Safe and Well-Maintained Facilities

As Chair of the Council's Committee on Facilities and Family Services, I know the importance of clean, safe, and well-maintained public facilities. The Department of General Services has made great strides under the leadership of Director Delano Hunter, and I encourage you to continue investing in the agency's improvement.

- 1. Increase investments in maintenance services, especially preventive maintenance in our schools and parks. I was proud to help increase DGS' Facility Management Division budget for public education by 5% in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget. We must sustain that investment as a core service of government, especially in our schools and parks that are years away from being fully modernized. DGS has already begun a cultural shift from focusing on reacting to issues to preventing them. Building systems like HVAC, roofs, elevators and plumbing all need regular, preventative attention to ensure problems are identified before they become crises that interrupt learning and programming. DGS should develop an explicit preventive maintenance (PM) plan and ensure its staff and contractors document PM tasks in Salesforce to ensure accountability. DGS should stockpile common equipment and parts that require a long lead-time to procure to reduce outages especially for elevators.
- 2. **Invest in security and cleanliness across our public facilities.** I am grateful for Director Hunter's partnership in reviewing the status of all locks and doors in our DCPS facilities. We should increase our locksmith capacity to ensure problems his team identifies during this year's winter work order blitz can be resolved promptly with the high priority urgency they deserve. Additionally, we should support more consistent trash and recycling collections in our public parks by streamlining responsibilities across agencies.
- 3. Ensure school readiness and better coordination throughout DGS' portfolio. Each summer since taking office I have led school readiness tours of each Ward 4 DC Public School. In 2022 I also visited every DPR facility and in 2023, after being named chair of the facilities committee, we visited a school and park in all eight wards as well as several MPD, FEMS, DYRS and DACL senior centers. During these visits, I observed several challenges with coordination and communication between DGS and its client agencies. To improve readiness throughout the portfolio, there should be clear lines of responsibility around regular maintenance tasks, better transparency about the status of all work orders, and better feedback loops between client agency staff and DGS leadership.
- 4. Dedicate Capital Funding for ADA Compliance. Far too many District government spaces, especially in our schools and recreation centers are not accessible to District residents, employees, and visitors with disabilities. Public school students with mobility disabilities should not be forced to stay on the first floor and complete a work packet while their peers fully participate in class on an upper floor because an elevator has been inoperable for months. Seniors should not be forced to be dependent on others to open doors for them to enter a recreation center because the ADA buttons do not work. I hear from District residents with disabilities about these types of experiences on a daily basis. Their experiences are both immoral and a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. These situations persist for far too long often because agencies do not have the funding to bring their facilities into compliance with the ADA. ODR should work with agencies to identify ADA violations that require capital funding to remedy and the Executive should dedicate funding for those projects in the FY25 budget and beyond.

- 5. **Invest in our DPR recreation centers and programming.** Parks and recreational activities are important for our communities. I had the opportunity to tour many DPR recreation centers and there are improvements needed throughout the District. However, there are numerous facilities in Ward 4 that are seriously overdue for modernization and need to be upgraded. Our families and seniors deserve clean and well-maintained parks. Ward 4 centers that need upgrading include:
 - Riggs-LaSalle Recreation Center: a new environmentally friendly turf field; repair or replace the gymnasium roof,
 - Shepherd Elementary School: replace the PiP playground surface and install CESfriendly equipment, and
 - Grant Circle playground: work with NPS to replace the recently removed toddler-aged playground.

Invest in Public Safety, Transportation, and Our Community

1. **Build a new library on Kennedy Street.** Last year, Council funded 5 million dollars to build a library on Kennedy Street. This neighborhood has long struggled with violence and drug sales. There continues to be an urgent need for revitalization and public services to uplift the Brightwood Park community and meet larger needs in Ward 4. A suitable site has been identified and it can accommodate a neighborhood library, housing, and other services. This is the very model DCPL leadership claims it wants in our communities.

After multiple conversations with the Executive, it is time to release an RFP and begin bringing resources to this community. I also request an increase to capital funds for both the construction of the new Kennedy Street Library, as well as the renovation of the **Shepherd Park/Juanita E. Thornton Library**. Increased funding will allow both of these important projects to proceed.

- 2. **\$30M recurring funds increase over FY24 funding levels to address the rise in domestic violence.** Although domestic violence continues to rise in the District, domestic violence organizations and the services they provide to survivors continue to face serious cuts every year. Any serious discussion about public safety must include addressing domestic violence in the District. Domestic violence is devastating to survivors, their families, and the community as a whole and every year that we choose to not invest in prevention or services, creates further harm. The \$30 million increase would pay for:
 - \$1.6 million for economic empowerment/cash assistance for survivors,
 - \$14.36 million for long-term and emergency housing and necessary support staff
 - \$665,000 for culturally specific services,
 - \$845,000 mental health services,
 - \$355,000 in prevention to support educating and engaging youth on healthy relationships, and
 - \$2 million in language access service.

- 3. Fund Conflict Resolution courses in all DCPS and DCPCS. I introduced <u>B25-420</u>, the "Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023" in July 2023. There is tremendous pressure on our kids these days. They are confronted with situations that generate a level of anxiety that causes some to act out or struggle to stay focused. We need to give our children the tools they need to manage their emotions and resolve their problems peacefully. If we start in our schools, we can instill lifelong skills that help students overcome conflicts, build positive and lasting relationships, and make our communities safer. Conflict resolution education is already making a positive impact in select schools that have dedicated programs. We need to expand it to every school, and we can do it in the FY25 budget.
- 4. Fully Fund the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2021. Record sealing is a crucial component of public safety, but the District currently has "one of the most complex and restrictive record relief laws in the country" according to the Collateral Consequences Resource Center. One in seven adults in DC have a publicly available criminal record, and only half of those records include an actual conviction. These records prevent people from being approved for housing and employment, which in turn leads to a person being more likely to reengage in criminal activity. The Second Chance Act expands eligibility for criminal record sealing and expungement, making it easier for people with records to obtain necessities like housing and employment, but it has been sitting unfunded and unusable for two years. Any DC agency budget needs for implementation should be filled at the beginning of FY25 so that people do not have to wait any longer to seal old, irrelevant records. In addition, DC should begin pursuing the many available federal and private grants to fund the automatic portions of the bill that are now set to becoming applicable at the beginning of FY26.
- 5. Fund a grant program to provide for the operating security needs of nonprofit and faith-based institutions. Hate crimes have increased against many groups in the District and we need to do more to protect our communities. We cannot sit back and allow hate to go unchecked. We need to give communities the tools to be able to feel safe. A grant program of \$500,000 will help to address the serious security concerns for many faith-based institutions.
- 6. Fourth District renovations. The Fourth District MPD facility is long overdue for renovation. From leaking ceilings to cell blocks without plumbing or electricity, the 4D station is in unacceptable condition. Please provide me with updates on any planned renovations of the facility and ensure the necessary funding for urgent issues is included in the FY25 budget.
- 7. Maintain funding for the ONSE Leadership Academy at MacFarland Middle School. Last year I funded the ONSE Leadership Academy at MacFarland Middle School. I'm asking that you maintain funding for this critical program. Our young people are looking to us for assistance and guidance and this program does the prevention work inside our school with mentors and coaches setting a good example.
- 8. **Invest in our Violence Interrupters**. Both OAG and ONSE's violence interrupters are helping to make our city safer and deserve our support. I'm asking that you increase funding for training and personnel for these programs so that we can hire more workers and continue to increase the effectiveness of these programs.
- 9. **\$31.7 million to continue funding for the Access to Justice Initiative.** The Initiative's services promote housing stability, public safety, and economic opportunity for low-income DC residents.

- 10. **Maintain funding for Ward 4 Clean Teams.** Our Clean Teams provide essential sanitation and landscape maintenance work along our commercial corridors. I ask that we increase the funding for each team so they can better handle the workload associated with such a long and vibrant corridor.
- 11. Increase DPW SWEEP Capacity. The Department of Public Works Solid Waste Education and Enforcement Program (SWEEP) helps keep our streets, alleys, and public lands clean. The SWEEP teams also enforce illegal dumping and private collection laws to ensure properties have inadequate containers and collections of solid waste. Funding my CLEAN Collections bill (Bill 25-131) would be a great first step in ensuring we have the policies and staffing in place to help keep our communities clean and safe.
- 12. **Maintain funding for Ward 4 Main Streets**. I'm asking that you maintain funding for our five Main Streets program for Petworth, Uptown, Lower and Upper Georgia Avenue, and the Parks at Walter Reed. Our Main Street programs are crucial to supporting our businesses and helping our neighborhoods remain vibrant and financially stable.
- 13. **Fund Broad Branch Road, Eastern Avenue, and Grant Circle Rehabilitation Projects**. DDOT has announced plans to rehabilitate Broad Branch Road between Linnean Avenue and Beach Drive; Eastern Avenue between New Hampshire and Whittier; and Grant Circle. Each project will bring critical infrastructure upgrades and traffic safety improvements to key transit corridors. I am asking for these important projects to be fully funded.
- 14. Traffic Signals at New Hampshire & Taylor NW and 16th & Leegate & Myrtle NW. I am requesting that you fund and construct new traffic signals at the intersections of New Hampshire Avenue & Taylor Street NW and 16th & Leegate & Myrtle NW. Neighbors experience consistent crashes and near-misses at New Hampshire Avenue & Taylor Street NW, putting all road users at risk. Additionally, a new traffic signal at 16th & Leegate & Myrtle NW will help students and many other neighbors safely cross 16th Street, where a child was recently struck by a driver.
- 15. **Maintain Funding for the Safe Routes to School Act**. The Safe Routes to School Act, which was passed and funded as part of the Safe Streets for Students Amendment Act of 2022, has begun delivering improved traffic safety where we need it most, around our schools. Improvements include expanded school zones, flashing signs, raised crosswalks, speed bumps, crosswalk striping, improved signage, and more for at least 25 schools per year. I am asking you to maintain funding for the Safe Routes to School program.
- 16. Fund \$200 Million in increased funding to stabilize Metro. There is no overstating how critical Metro is for our families, our students, our seniors, our workers, our small businesses, and our communities as a whole. DC needs a reliable public transit system, which means DC must do its part to address the system's budget shortfall for this year. Extra funding from the District and other jurisdictions can prevent disastrous service cuts. I hope the added funding can prevent cuts to key Ward 4 bus lines like the M4, H8/H9, K2, 52/54, 60, 62/63, and 64.
- 17. **Fully fund lead-free DC.** Water safety is crucial to a healthy DC and requires our continued investment. The Lead Free DC plan will cost more than \$1 billion in total, and DC Water has a nearly \$60 million funding gap to cover overall costs of private-side replacements. The District should fulfill DC Water's funding request for \$3.1 million for this program in FY25.

18. **Metropolitan Branch Trail.** Design a trail connection between the Metropolitan Branch Trail (MBT) at Fort Totten and the future Prince George's County Connector. In 2023, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission secured funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation to develop a shared-use path between the Northwest Branch Trail of the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail in Chillum to Avondale Community Park, which borders Eastern Avenue in the District. To complement this project, DDOT should begin planning its own trail connection to the Metropolitan Branch Trail along Eastern Avenue and Gallatin Street N.E.

Ward 4 Capital Projects:

Keep modernizations on time and maintain their funding. A number of projects in Ward 4 are scheduled for upcoming modernizations. It is important for all of the projects to remain on schedule and that the community is updated. The Ward 4 community is excited for these projects and it's important that we continue to invest in our neighborhoods with modernized facilities.

- Upshur Recreation Center
- Emery Heights Community Center
- Renovating the Spray Parks at Fort Stevens and Takoma
- Outdoor Pool at The Parks at Walter Reed
- Capital Improvements to Petworth Neighborhood Library
- LaSalle-Backus Elementary Modernization
- Barnard Elementary Partial Modernization
- New cafeteria for Coolidge High School to ease crowding with Ida B Wells MS
- Aspen Street Rehabilitation
- Georgia Avenue Bus Priority Project
- 14th Street Bus Priority Project

This letter doesn't begin to cover all the investments that are needed for the District to thrive. I am hearing more and more that the District is changing. I hope that we can work together to change it for the better.

I look forward to working with you to invest in our communities and improve city services to respond to the challenges of the moment.

In Service,

Janeese Lewis George

Janeese Lewis George Ward 4 DC Councilmember