**DC Office on Aging Oversight Hearing**

**Committee on Housing and Community Development**

**Councilmember Anita Bonds**

**February 12, 2016**

Good Morning Councilmember Bonds and members of the Committee. My name is Sally White and I am Executive Director of Iona Senior Services and Co-Chair of the DC Senior Advisory Coalition. I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the work of the DC Office on Aging to serve older adults in the District of Columbia.

I want to start out by saying that I am encouraged by some things that are happening at the Office on Aging. These include the following:

* The newly appointed Executive Director, Laura Newland is energetic, smart and capable.
* Her team at the Office on Aging is approachable and encouraging of feedback and input from community partners.
* The Office on Aging and Department of Health Care Finance are working to improve the staggeringly complicated application and enrollment process into the variety of Medicaid and Medicaid Waiver programs for lower income older adults, especially the EPD waiver and Adult Day Health Care.
* The Office on Aging has issued an RFA for a citywide needs assessment which if done properly—and that is a tall order—could be extremely valuable going forward.
* The District’s Age-Friendly DC plan remains a powerful tool for the Office on Aging to use to improve support for older DC residents and indeed, all DC residents for years to come.

But many challenges remain.

* At Iona we have waiting lists for home delivered meals (10 people), social work case management (25 people) and adult day health care (8 people). Citywide there continues to be substantial unmet needs in these areas.
* Affordable housing for seniors continues to be an enormous challenge.
* There is much more work to be done in the area of transportation for seniors in need. Seabury does an excellent job with the Seabury Connector program, but the Office on Aging and the District need a master plan, a fully funded strategy to meet the growing unmet need for transportation. Low reimbursement rates continue to erode the ability of organizations to provide much needed support. The recently announced planned closure of the Washington Home is yet another sign of the financial challenges of delivering quality care.
* While admirable in their intention, living wage requirements and new Federal requirements to pay for home care aides transportation time have increased expenses significantly for certain agencies making it difficult to maintain levels of care without increased funding.
* Given funding levels which have remain essentially flat for some time, wages are not competitive for many critical positions such as social workers and nutritionists.
* Some grantee agencies remain wary of honestly reporting challenges to the Office on Aging for fear of “having their wrist slapped” as one person explained to me.
* The reporting and reimbursement process remains quite burdensome still without gathering the kind of data that could help guide policy creating yet another barrier to the delivery of care.
* The application process for the EPD Waiver and Adult Day Health Care to date remain mired in confusion and delays.

The Commission on Aging in other jurisdictions is a valued partner in implementing change and advocating for all seniors. Unfortunately that has not been the case in the District. We have one excellent candidate for the Commission on Aging who submitted her application to the Office of Boards and Commissions over two years ago and was just told, without explanation of any kind, that she should forget it; it’s not going to happen. We are hopeful that the new chapter opened by Acting Director Newland can change that.

While we are heartened by the fact that the Office on Aging is conducting a needs assessment, we are concerned that what is contemplated might be an assessment of the Office on Aging rather than a needs assessment of the community. A solid needs assessment could be quite useful, but as experience has shown not all such projects have been productive. About five years ago, the Office on Aging commissioned a needs assessment but the resulting product was so poorly done that then Deputy Mayor BB Otero said they could not call it a needs assessment. What will be done differently this time to be sure that doesn’t happen again? Will $100,000 be enough to do the kind of study that could deliver real benefits?

As we look at needs across the city, we see significant unmet needs and a long way to go to establish structures to deliver services that can meet those needs. Laura Newland described DCOA as a “gap filling organization”. While I agree with this statement, I hope she and others recognize the need for the Office on Aging to also be a “gap preventing organization”. I think the mindset is different between the two. Yes, the Office on Aging absolutely needs to fill the gaps in services and supports for those most in need, but the Office on Aging has within its grasp the ability to be at the forefront of effective service delivery, innovation and creative partnerships. It’s time to move on from counting meals served to visiting homebound seniors to see firsthand the complexities of their lives. It’s time to explore best practices from around the country if not the world and incorporate them into plans for the future, into a vision for the future.

We must not leave the 100,000+ older adults in the District of Columbia behind as the city is booming around them. We need the support of the Council and the Mayor to make this happen. The 5% cut in the Office on Aging’s budget for FY16 allowed the slow erosion in support for services to continue. We understand that further cuts are possible again this year. Additional cuts could be devastating. the number of seniors is growing, there needs are growing, the Office on Aging’s budget needs to be restored at least to FY15 levels and invested in direct services such as transportation, nutrition services and legal services to low income residents and services for Spanish speaking older DC residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today and I’m happy to answer any questions.