



**Joint Oversight Roundtable
On Public Safety, Behavioral Health Services, and Youth
December 13, 2023**

Testimony by Desmond Barr

Good afternoon. My name is Desmond Barr.

My Role

I am here as the very first **Emerging Adult Fellow** of the Justice Policy Institute (JPI). In this role, I bring the perspective of DC's system-impacted young adults to JPI's work.

I am also a **Peer Mentor** with a Credible Messenger program. I advise Credible Messengers on how to best engage their youth and serve as mentor to youth. I lead weekly groups, create safe and healing spaces, and teach lessons to prepare mentees to become positive role models in their communities.

My Experience

I first got involved in the justice system at age 13. Between then and 18, I was in and out of YSC and New Beginnings. When I was 16, I was placed by DYRS in Silver Oak Academy in Keymar, Maryland, two hours away from my family in a place I didn't know and without any access to my family.

I later committed an offense close to my 18th birthday and was held by the court until I turned 18 so that I could be charged as an adult. I received a harsher sentence with no consideration that I was still a developing young person.

I returned to the community in 2020 at age 19. I was assigned a Credible Messenger, Mr. Curtis, who helped me transition back into the community. He kept me on the right side of the tracks at my most vulnerable point to ensure that I didn't get re-arrested. He served as a mentor, father figure, and role model all in one. I looked up to him and he inspired me to do better and

become more than what others may have expected of me. He helped me look for employment and provided other services. I also restarted my degree program at UDC.

However, that September, I was in a car accident that left me paralyzed from the waist down. I spent nearly a year in a rehabilitation facility and had to drop out of college. Yet, I was committed to getting my life on track and remained active in all programming through the Credible Messengers from ERPCP.

I was eventually invited to become a peer mentor based on my leadership skills, maturity, and progress. This opened the door for me to get nominated this year to become an emerging adult fellow with JPI.

Lessons Learned

I've learned that I can be a role model. My story can prevent others from making the same mistakes I made. I also now see how my voice and perspective and the voices of my peers are needed in this space.

Recommendations

As such, I firmly believe the District needs to take these four actions:

- 1. Go to where the young people are.** Hearing from me and people my age shouldn't only occur because I'm working with organizations and advocates. Go to where the young people are - YSC, New Beginnings, DC Jail, and Credible Messenger group sessions. Go regularly. Convene your own sessions.
- 2. Invest more in Credible Messengers.** Credible Messengers have been crucial to guiding my transition back into the community. If it weren't for Credible Messengers, I wouldn't be here today. Without their work, more of our youth would retreat back to the street.
- 3. Create pathways for youth to thrive.** In the same way that I was pulled along by Credible Messengers and given the opportunity to become a fellow with JPI, others need these same opportunities, pathways, and support. This should include more employment, job training, education, internships, and mentorships.
- 4. Help make our communities better.** Where I grew up, public housing was run down and not always suitable for living. At my schools, there was so much turnover that I never really got to know or connect with my teachers. As a child, I couldn't play outside due to the violence. There were no community recreation centers for me to go. I didn't want to

live there, but I had no choice. These communities have suffered from decades of disregard. The District must invest more in these communities, which will result in a tangible and direct positive impact.

Thank you.