



TESTIMONY BY LAEL CHESTER & MAYA SUSSMAN
Emerging Adult Justice Project

Submitted to
COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Public Hearing on B25-0537
Whole Government Response to Crime Act of 2023
Monday, December 11, 2023, at 12:00 p.m.
Room 500 (Track A)
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW,
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairwoman Pinto and Members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the Whole Government Response to Crime Act of 2023, and in particular, the creation of a new and critically important position, *Director of Emerging Adult Services*. We work on the Emerging Adult Justice Project (EAJP) at Columbia University's Justice Lab: Lael Chester is the Director and Maya Sussman is the Senior Manager of Research and Policy. The EAJP conducts action research projects focused on youth ages 18 to 26 involved in the criminal legal system. The EAJP has published research papers, issue briefs, and legislative reports on innovative practices and policies across the United States and abroad and has become a national expert in the burgeoning field of emerging adult justice.

Research shows that the transition from being a youth, dependent on other adults emotionally, practically, and financially, to becoming a mature and independent adult takes years, and is a distinct and critically important developmental stage. Research also shows that the vast majority of youth who have the opportunities and support to make a healthy transition will mature "out of" the risk-taking behavior that increases during emerging adulthood, including criminal behavior. But under the current structure, many young people are falling through the cracks between the child and adult serving systems and are not receiving effective and developmentally appropriate services and programs, especially those who become involved in the criminal legal system.

Over the last decade jurisdictions across the United States have been pursuing innovative practices and policies focused *specifically* on emerging adults involved in the justice system. We are pleased to report that Washington, D.C. has become a leader in these efforts: The District is one of only seven jurisdictions in the United States that provides a more developmentally appropriate hybrid legal system for emerging adults, combining elements of the youth and adult criminal legal systems to target this specific age group. As the EAJP found in our recent national research report, [A Time For Change: A National Scan and Analysis of Hybrid Justice Systems for Emerging Adults](#), Washington, D.C.'s statute, the Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2018 (YRA), is particularly robust and contains many of the features of a model statute.¹

One of the most important features of the YRA is the requirement that the District create comprehensive continuums of care for young people in the community, and during and post-system contact. To accomplish this, the District commissioned the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) to develop a [Strategic Plan](#), which was delivered to the Mayor in November 2021. This Strategic Plan was informed by a diverse group of experts in the District, including youth with direct experience, community organizations, leaders with expertise, and the key justice system stakeholders. This Plan provides the District with a thoughtful, clear, and comprehensive roadmap. Included in the Strategic Plan is the creation of, essentially, a Director of Emerging Adult Services.

It is now over two years later and it has become even more apparent that the District needs to establish a Director of Emerging Adult Services to fully realize the potential of this groundbreaking statutory provision. There needs to be someone specifically assigned to oversee the implementation of the Strategic Plan, so the work does not fall through the cracks in the same way that emerging adults have historically fallen through the cracks between youth and adult systems. This person can play a key role in linking the important range of critical services, including mental health care, housing, education, and employment, that all support healthy development and improve public safety, and will coordinate efforts across the various agencies. In addition, the Director of Emerging Adult Services can play a key role in monitoring overall progress and informing the Council and others of resources and/or changes in practices and policies that may be needed in the future. The work of a new Director of Emerging Adult Services would focus on a critical age group, and there is no doubt that the impact of this work would be to create a healthier, safer Washington, D.C. for everyone.

¹ Siringil Perker, Selen and Chester, Lael E.H. Time for Change: A National Scan and Analysis of Hybrid Justice Systems for Emerging Adults. New York, NY: Columbia University, 2023.