

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the Attorney General**



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Before Councilmember Brooke Pinto, Chairwoman

**Public Hearing on
Bill 25-695, Safe Neighborhoods Amendment Act of 2024**

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**John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20001**

Introduction

Chairwoman Pinto and Councilmembers, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts about Bill 25-695, the proposed “Safe Neighborhoods Amendment Act of 2024.” My testimony focuses on the proposed merger of the District’s various violence interruption programs, including the Office of Attorney General’s Cure the Streets Program (CTS), under a new independent agency.

Violence interruption, or VI, is critical to promoting public safety and reducing retaliatory gun violence. A long-term, effective, comprehensive public safety strategy requires that traditional law enforcement—policing, prosecution and punishment—be complemented with community-based programs that work to prevent crime from happening. Community-based organizations, or CBOs, most familiar with the facts and relationships on the ground are often best positioned to have the greatest impact. CTS is based on the understanding that trusted residents with deep community ties are uniquely capable of building relationships and mediating conflicts before they escalate.

I am proud of the impact CTS has had since its inception in 2018. Currently, through grants to four different CBOs, OAG’s CTS program supports nearly 100 full-time employees serving 10 specific DC neighborhoods that have historically experienced the highest levels of gun violence. Last year, when the District saw a historic spike in violent crime, including a 34% increase in citywide gun homicides, CTS neighborhoods had a 2% decrease in gun homicides and a 12% decrease in shootings.

Not all VI programs use the same model and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, there are common elements that are important for any successful community-based VI program. These include financial stability and predictability, operational support and accountability, and ready access to necessary resources. In a perfect world, a single District agency would oversee and support all VI programs in order ensure those essential elements are met despite their different models.

This is, I believe, the Act’s aspiration, and since I took office, I have worked hard to make that happen. But unfortunately, to date, we have not been able to reach a merger agreement. For OAG to support a merger involving CTS, it is essential that there are assurances that, post-merger, the program will continue to be well-managed, funded, and supported.

CTS Program Implementation & Success

The Council made a smart investment in public safety when it supported OAG’s launch of CTS. OAG launched two pilot CTS sites in July 2018 one in Trinidad/Arboretum in Ward 5 and the other in Trenton Park/Wahler Place in Ward 8.

By January 2020, OAG—again with financial support from the Council—expanded to four additional neighborhoods: Eckington/Truxton Circle in Ward 5, Marshall Heights in Ward 7, and Washington Highlands and Bellevue, both in Ward 8. In response to Council and community requests, CTS again expanded in 2022, with four additional sites: Brightwood Park/Petworth in Wards 1 and 4, Sursum Coda/Ivy City in Wards 5 and 6, Historic Anacostia/Fairlawn in Ward 8, and Congress Heights in Ward 8. All of these sites were selected using criteria prescribed by the

nationally recognized and evidence-based Cure Violence Global model and based largely on the high levels of gun violence in those neighborhoods.

The work that CTS teams do is not easy, but their dedication is unwavering. They understand that, when it is implemented effectively, violence interruption saves lives. As noted, the work is paying off: CTS sites are seeing decreased levels of gun violence. Compared to the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement's priority areas, CTS has demonstrated greater effectiveness in reducing gun homicides and assaults with a deadly weapon. And both the CTS sites and the ONSE priority areas have seen greater reductions in gun violence than other areas of the city where there are no violence interruption programs.

Speaking for CTS, these outcomes are not by happenstance. OAG implemented an evidenced-based VI model tailored to the needs of specific DC neighborhoods. Furthermore, OAG has ensured that CTS adheres to the model's core principles, professionalizes its operations, and, most importantly, supports its grantees with qualified leadership and grant management. This commitment requires dedicated resources, which, as you know, OAG assumed full responsibility for in FY 2024. In addition to funding the substantial operational costs and full-time salaries that reflect employees' responsibilities and risks, OAG invests in professional development opportunities, comprehensive training, and worker benefits. Recognizing the emotional toll of this work, we offer individual and group counseling for CTS staff.

OAG is committed to continuous improvement and to data-driven assessments, and we are collaborating with institutions like Johns Hopkins University to conduct further research on our program.

CTS' Future & Current Needs

The success and growth of CTS is reason for optimism, and I appreciate that the bill prioritizes CTS's continued presence in the District. In determining whether and how to merge CTS into a different agency—either a new independent agency or an existing executive branch agency—I encourage this Council to consider the following principles, some of which I set out in my February 26, 2024, letter.

First, any merger must avoid eroding the identity and effectiveness of successful programs. Consolidation risks depriving the individual programs of the level of leadership and attention necessary to be fully successful.

Second, the success of any merger will require a clearly defined vision for the work moving forward and the appointment of qualified leadership with the autonomy and resources needed to succeed.

Third, a merged program, in addition to harnessing economies of scale, must ensure efficient, real-time information sharing that leverages technology and that can adapt to quickly changing dynamics.

Fourth, CTS has professionalized its violence interruption work by implementing systems to issue grants, oversee grantees, collect data, ensure financial accountability, and provide professional development to grantees' employees. These systems ensure the program's longevity. A merger must ensure that these protocols continue.

Fifth, successful VI programs require adequate and predictable financial support to ensure long-term effectiveness and sustainability. Moreover, VI programs work best when they are seamlessly integrated with support services that address the root causes of violence. These services include, for example, job readiness training, healthcare screening, mental health and substance use disorder treatment, housing assistance, relocation facilitation, and vital records support. To maximize effectiveness, any merged program will need to ensure that the VI staff can immediately—without delay—connect people with the executive branch services they need.

Finally, CTS employs nearly 100 staff members, many of whom are returning citizens. These trusted messengers have built deep connections in the neighborhoods they serve, act as role models to program participants, and earn a living wage that provides stability and a second chance. For any merger to succeed, these employment opportunities and relationships must be maintained and fortified.

Effective implementation of a merger will require a genuine commitment from all involved that these six principles will inform the work going forward. In the interim, until that commitment is reliably established, I urge the Council to act on the three most critical areas currently lacking in violence interruption work: 1) access to resources; 2) technology investment; and 3) dedicated collaborative spaces. The READY Center with the Department of Corrections offers a promising model for providing immediate, streamlined connections to critical services. Investing in technology for social media monitoring and conflict identification can significantly enhance the effectiveness of VI programs. Finally, dedicated spaces for relationship building and on-the-ground collaboration between different VI programs are vital. These spaces ensure continuity and empower VI professionals to address conflicts that transcend specific geographic boundaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am grateful to the Council for recognizing the importance of violence interruption programs in the District's overall gun violence strategy, and for engaging in the effort to improve the infrastructure, oversight, and coordinated support for this critical prevention work. I particularly thank Councilmember McDuffie for introducing this bill, as well as the Councilmembers who have visited the CTS sites, spoken to staff, and who have advocated for establishing CTS sites in their wards. I look forward to working with your Committee and the Council to identify the most effective approach to sustaining CTS and continuing to maximize the return on our shared investment.

I welcome any questions you may have.