

Crystal Gray
Department of Parks and Recreation
Budget Hearing Testimony
Committee of Recreation, Libraries, and Youth Affairs
Wednesday, April 5th, 2023

Good afternoon DPR,

My name is Crystal Gray. I am a proud parent of Amani Walker, who is a 2nd grader and attends Watkins Elementary School. I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) as a PAVE Citywide and Ward 6 PLE Board Member, Leaders of Color fellow, a member of the Advisory Committee of the student assignment and school boundary process and also a Rev.

First, I want to thank DPR for creating a lottery sign-up system for their summer programming along with expanded programming options. Having DPR centers expand their hours can keep children off the street. Also thanks to the District for creating more than 600 positions and 5000 seats! This is an amazing milestone and I appreciate this. Out of school time is personally my top priority because I have a daughter who will need to stay active and engaged. I hope that we will continue to see an even greater investment in our kids, families, and communities for the upcoming years.

My daughter Amani has been participating in DPR programs since she was three years old and she's now seven! This means that each year, for half of her life, we've traveled to rec centers all over the District so she could swim, cheer, enroll in summer rec camps, and little discoverers. We have so many great memories of celebrating family birthdays and graduations at these sites! Access to safe, well-resourced recreational spaces is important in general, but DPR sites hold an extra special place in my family's heart!

I am testifying today because even though we have made it easier for us to sign up for the lottery system for DPR, it needs to be easier for people who are not knowledgeable about the process to access DPR programming. Many of our underserved students have underserved parents who can't read, write, or have the resources to fill out the applications or apply for financial aid. We need group seminars, info sessions, and QR codes to assist with the process.

DPR services are so resourceful and helpful, but if you're not a parent in the know then you just won't know, and that's not fair at all! I often must coordinate information sharing with parents in my community about DPR sites, registration and programming. I do independent research on

programs, availability, access and key registration dates to send information out to residents. All out of my time and pocket. Many parents aren't aware of sites like Learn24dc.gov and would likely miss out without the extra outreach. To address these and other issues which are barriers to accessing OST programs, I am asking that you create a strategic plan with families, educators, OST providers, and community partners to ensure access to in-demand programs for all kids and to use this to provide recommendations to the council (Please tie this into the budget). This plan must begin with innovative and consistent engagement with families to determine the types of programs we want in our wards, communities, and what programs are specifically best for our kids. Each kid learns and plays differently. We want to make sure that we are cultivating their time and talent!

This step is especially important because of the quality of DPR sites and program offerings east of the river. We've traveled over to Navy Yard and Turkey Thicket for most of Amani's programming. I shouldn't have had to move out of my ward because of the quality of programming being offered in our ward 8 neighborhoods. I know that my family isn't alone in this, and I hope that as you prioritize the budget, that this strategic plan and host Community Info Sessions you will put a plan and some money in place for families to better understand DPR programs, have strategic strategies on what programs will be best for their children, and improve program offerings so that more families can feel good about utilizing DPR sites closer to home. We've lost a few of our specialized camps such as swim camp, spanish camp, and sports camp for children under 11. We have to be diligent in creating quality camps for our future.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District!

Crystal Gray
PAVE Citywide and Ward 6 PLE Board Member