



The Metropolitan Community Church
of Washington, DC

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July 27, 2023

Dear District of Columbia Officials:

We are writing to express serious concerns regarding the District of Columbia Department of Corrections (DOC) plan to use 501 New York Ave NW as the D.C. Central Cell Block facility. The Metropolitan Community Church of Washington, DC (MCCDC) has been an active part of this vibrant neighborhood since the 1970s, with a special ministry to the LGBTQIA community. Our church values inclusiveness, social justice, and ensuring ALL people are respected and treated with dignity. We are located a block and a half from the proposed location for the temporary site of the D.C. Central Cell Block. We have many community partnerships, including a partnership with the Early Learner's Academy which operates in our facility on weekdays, serving many families in our community.

We understand the current D.C. Central Cell Block is unsustainable and inhumane as reported in the press. And so, we support the city's efforts to resolve the conditions in the Daly building. However, ***we are deeply concerned as to whether the city is replacing one inhumane environment for another.***

In addition, we are concerned about the impact on constituents in the neighborhood related to additional traffic in a congested area that is already facing safety issues for both pedestrians and drivers. On a daily basis, the intersection at L street NW, 5th Street NW, and New York Avenue NW has back-ups that force pedestrians to walk through or around blocked crosswalks. Our Senior Pastor, Rev. Elder Dwayne Johnson, a resident of the neighborhood since 2009, has witnessed the risk to those trying to cross, especially to older adults, those in wheelchairs, and children.

We understand that since 2021, D.C. has been working to identify a temporary location as a swing space to allow for the renovation of the Daly building yet no outreach was done to the community prior to site selection occurring. We are concerned that there was no community engagement in the process for identifying appropriate swing space for the Central Cell Block, nor have details been shared with the community on what that process entailed and what other locations were considered.

The current location of the D.C. Central Cell Block at the Daly building is surrounded by federal and local court and administrative buildings yet 501 New York Ave. NW by contrast is surrounded by residences, a day care, office buildings, and businesses which generate a greater need for community engagement. In fact, it was not until our ANC Commissioner, Rachelle Nigro, became aware of these plans earlier this year that the community was informed of this project.

What is even more concerning now is there continues to be a lack of engagement with the community. While the D.C. Department of General Services and the project architects have provided presentations, DOC has failed to attend monthly meetings of ANC 2G as requested, raising questions about how responsive DOC will be to working with the community in the operations and management of the facility. DOC finally did attend the ANC 6E meeting on July 11, 2023, but that meeting raised more questions about the operations of the facility. As a result, ANC 6E issued a letter opposing the temporary location of the Central Cell Block at 501 New York Ave. NW.

In addition to the lack of community engagement, we restate our concern about whether this location will actually address the core problems related to the humane treatment of the individuals held. While this location is described as a temporary solution pending renovation of Daly, there is no funding identified or timeline for the repairs to Daly that would indicate how long this location would be used as the Central Cell Block. And, while 501 New York Ave. will be renovated, what about the wellbeing of those detained within the 24 cells being created in the basement with limited light? We understand the number of individuals the facility will be designed to handle, but the community has not been provided details on the average number of people actually held in the D.C. Central Cell Block to have a clearer sense of how this solution will address the treatment of those individuals.

In light of this, we request more active engagement by city officials that will be in charge of the operation and management of this facility. Transparency is a necessity that has been sorely lacking.

We also request that that all officials involved approach this is an opportunity to consider whether this project aligns with the broader vision of the District of Columbia. The Mayor and Councilmember Pinto are consistently pointing to the renovation of downtown as a priority. This location could support that vision as a welcome center (accessible to nearby hotels and the convention center), an education center for youth, or a place to provide other services that would enhance both the neighborhood and the city; congestion would still need to be taken into consideration to ensure that services provided would have reduced impact on traffic.

Thank you for considering our serious concerns and addressing them accordingly.

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors of MCCDC

Rev. Elder Dwayne Johnson

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