

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AND REGULATORY AFFAIRS**



Agency Performance Public Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Ernest Chrappah
Director
Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

Before the
Committee of the Whole
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

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12:00 p.m.

Via Virtual Platform

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, and staff. I am Ernest Chrappah, the Director of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). I am here this afternoon to share the many accomplishments and ongoing activities of the agency in fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2021 to date.

Introduction

Despite a global pandemic, I am proud to report that in fiscal year 2020, and thus far in fiscal year 2021, DCRA met or exceeded all of our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which are essentially measurements for how successfully we deliver our core services. According to the Office of Budget and Performance Management's fiscal year 2020 accountability reports, when compared with 23 other District agencies of similar size, DCRA is among the top three (3) performing agencies in terms of meeting its KPIs and strategic initiatives. Take the area of business licensing for example. During the last fiscal year, our goal was to review license applications and process them within one day of submission at least 80 percent of the time. In actuality, we met this goal 95 percent of the time, ensuring that entrepreneurs could get their business up and running as fast as possible.

Across the Bowser Administration, District Government agencies are working hard to support Mayor Muriel Bowser's vision of providing every resident with a Fair Shot. At DCRA, we work with thousands of business owners and residents each month, but the people who reach out to us for help are not just cases to us. We know that going the extra mile has a big impact on the people and businesses we serve.

Among the people DCRA helped last year was a Ward 2 family who paid a contractor to install solar panels on their roof. The family spent \$19,000 to make their house more energy

efficient, only to have the contractor disappear and refuse to complete the job or give the family a refund. With limited options, they turned to DCRA for help. An investigator from our Consumer Protection Unit was assigned to the case, and in less than 20 days, our investigator was able to recover \$17,000 for the family.

Ensuring safe housing for District renters is also part of DCRA's mission. In FY 2020, DCRA housing inspectors performed 17,557 inspections, and issued a total of 3,720 housing violation Notices of Infraction, both of which are higher than the previous fiscal year, despite the pandemic. Given the dangers of COVID-19, to protect the health of our employees and tenants, last spring we began offering the option of virtual inspections so that tenants could show inspectors potential violations via video on their smart phones or tablets, without risk of exposure. I am also pleased to share that when you compare the end of February 2021 with the same point in the 2020 fiscal year, confirmed housing abatements are up 47 percent.

In my testimony today I will focus on four general areas: improved customer service, digital transformation progress, adaptation to the challenges of the pandemic, and updates on our culture change initiative.

Improved Customer Service

Starting with improved customer service, in fiscal year 2020, DCRA fully implemented our new customer service model. Now, whatever method someone uses to contact the agency—whether by email, phone, social media, or via our website—the system automatically logs the communication before it is assigned to the appropriate member of our staff. The system also includes a time tracker, ensuring that customers get a response from the agency within three business days or less and that no communications fall through the cracks. In addition to providing

timely service, our new system focuses on quality service with surveys sent to every customer. To date, we have received more than 25,000 completed customer feedback surveys.

As a result of our new system, a series of customer services trainings, and the ongoing hard work of our staff, I am pleased to share that DCRA is now receiving weekly customer service satisfaction rates of 90 percent or higher. This is no small feat for any organization, let alone a government agency with a historic reputation for not meeting customer expectations. The satisfaction score is based on surveys completed by our customers at the conclusion of their interaction with the agency. Customers are asked to rate their interaction as either “poor,” “satisfactory,” or “excellent,” and are given the opportunity to expound on their rating. Since the start of this fiscal year, more than 14,000 people have completed surveys, nearly 13,000 of whom rated their interaction with the agency as either satisfactory or excellent. For the ten percent or so of customers who rate their experience as poor, the agency reaches out to the customer to see if there is anything we can do to better serve their needs. Our managers also closely monitor the ratings of their teams to ensure that additional training or coaching is provided, or appropriate disciplinary action is taken.

To further enhance the experience of our customers, over the last year DCRA created a team of Account Managers. Each ward in the city is assigned an Account Manager, who is responsible for troubleshooting particularly complex issues within their assigned ward, and liaising with contacts at our sister agencies, along with ANCs and Council constituent services staff. We understand that when an issue is complex with overlapping jurisdictions, it can be frustrating for residents. Our goal was to give them a single contact who can assist them, instead of bouncing them around between different divisions and agencies.

Digital Transformation Progress

As you know, when I became Director, one of my priorities was to improve the performance of the agency through a digital transformation strategy, with the goal of making things easier and more convenient for our customers. This effort was formalized in the agency's "Vision 2020" strategic plan, which we successfully completed at the close of calendar year 2020. Over the next few minutes, I would like to highlight several of our key achievements over the last year.

- **DCRA provided greater access to information with digital tools and resources to ensure that all DC residents can find solutions quickly and effortlessly.** In the past, residents, businesses and government agencies had to use four different data systems to access information about properties and businesses in the District, which often created confusion. To make things easier, in fiscal year 2020 DCRA launched "Scout," an online application that streamlines property and business data from the Property Information Verification System (PIVS), Permit Application Q-Tracker (Q-tracker), Business License Verification (BBLV), and Building Permit Application (OBPAT) into one. In fiscal year 2020, DCRA also launched "Access DC," which allows external and internal users to access the agency's online resources with a Single Sign-On (SSO), instead of having to remember multiple usernames and passwords. The new system also enhances security by verifying the email addresses of all users, conforming to the federal government's stringent FedRAMP security standards. In fiscal year 2020, we also enhanced our public dashboard with multi search functionality, making it easier to look up enforcement actions by name, address, case type, volume, and outcome.
- **DCRA improved inspection capabilities through the Resident Inspector Program.** Now in its second year, DCRA's innovative Resident Inspector Program has proven to be

a game-changer. As you will recall, the program applies successful elements of the on-demand, gig economy to three of the most requested inspections performed by DCRA. DCRA trains District residents to perform housing, illegal construction, and vacant building inspections, and then once the inspectors pass the relevant certification tests, we pay the trained inspectors whenever they successfully complete an inspection. Perhaps the truest measure of the program's success is the number of inspections that have taken place. Over the last year, February 2, 2020 – February 4, 2021, Resident Inspectors have completed: 2,016 property maintenance and housing inspections; 1,329 illegal construction inspections; and 2,042 vacant property inspections. While the Resident Inspector Program is not a replacement for the agency's team of full-time inspectors, it does allow the agency to meet the city's growing demand and divert its full-time inspectors toward more complex cases.

- **DCRA improved transparency with the creation of the Landlord Violations Tool.** Building upon our already comprehensive agency dashboard that is available to the public on our website, this past fall DCRA launched a new tool that helps District renters make more informed decisions about where to live. Using the tool, prospective tenants can check if a landlord has any outstanding, unaddressed housing violations. Our goal was to arm renters with information about landlords before they sign a lease, helping them avoid problematic landlords with a history of unaddressed housing violations. Within the first week of the application's launch, there were 8,000 views.
- **DCRA protected consumers with the launch of the Contractor Rating System.** To help District residents and businesses hire contractors and building professionals with more confidence, earlier this month we launched the DCRA Contractor Rating

System. Building on our expressed policy of transparency, the DCRA Contractor Rating System uses objective data to assign a rating of between one and five stars to licensed building professionals doing business in the District. Armed with this information, consumers can hire experienced, licensed professionals with proven track records, thus preventing the pain and hassle of dealing with a bad contractor. Unlike other rating platforms that are based on subjective customer reviews, these ratings are based solely on objective data, like the submission of complete permit applications, the accuracy of plans submitted for review, and safety inspections. I am proud to say that this is the only-known customer-facing contractor rating system in the country operated by a local government, and serves as another example of how DCRA is using technology to enhance the customer experience and protect homeowners.

- **DCRA improved the permit applicant process with launch of Permit Wizard.**

Recognizing that most homeowners are not building experts, DCRA set out to find a way to make applying for residential building permits easier and more intuitive. After a lot of work, I am pleased to share that earlier this month DCRA launched a new “Permit Wizard” that guides customers through a series of questions. Based on customers’ answers, the system advises what permits are needed, what the estimated total costs will be, and what plan reviews and inspections will likely be required by DCRA and sister agencies.

These are just some of many digital enhancements DCRA has made over the last year, all aimed at better serving our customers and making their interactions with the agency as smooth as possible.

Adapting to COVID-19

While nobody could have predicted the pandemic, DCRA's digital transformation positioned us well when the pandemic hit. While similar agencies across the country were scrambling to retool, DCRA remained open and adapted in just a couple of days without missing a beat. The investments we made under the leadership of Mayor Bowser to move all our services online has helped us build operational resilience and improve responsiveness to our customers. Throughout the pandemic, our customers have continued to be able to apply for and receive business licenses, submit plans and apply for permits, gain Certificates of Occupancy (something previously unavailable online), report illegal behavior, and schedule all types of inspections, including housing and vacant building inspections. Some of our service areas have even grown. Prior to the pandemic, our Small Business Resource Center was assisting approximately 400 customers per quarter. Now, with an array of virtual trainings and one-on-one sessions, our team is assisting nearly 1,000 customers per quarter.

In addition to continuing to provide our core services, DCRA was also called upon to assist in ensuring our city remained safe. Since last March, DCRA has conducted more than 500 proactive site visits to businesses, such as salons, gyms, and retail establishments to ensure that social distancing and other safety protocols are being followed. These visits are in addition to the nearly 200 complaint-based visits our Consumer Protection Unit and Resident Inspectors have completed, and the regular weekend compliance checks done at farmers markets and fish markets. And leading up to the Presidential Inauguration, our team conducted 119 proactive hotel visits to ensure compliance.

DCRA also acted urgently to draft and promulgate regulations to implement emergency legislation passed by the Council and signed by the Mayor. This included regulations to keep food

delivery platforms from overcharging restaurants and consumers, regulations establishing COVID-19 cleaning requirements in common areas of housing accommodations, and working with the Office of the Attorney General to establish a funeral bill of rights to protect consumers dealing with the passing of a loved one during the pandemic. To help District entrepreneurs, many of whom are hurting right now, DCRA will soon be issuing a rulemaking to (1) create a new, six-month business license so that seasonal small businesses no longer have to pay for a full, two-year license when they only operate a few months each year; and (2) significantly cut the fees for people starting home-based businesses as way to cut down on start-up costs. The rulemaking stems from recommendations made by DCRA's Working Group, which is comprised of a number of community leaders, advocates, and other key external stakeholders who the agency convened throughout last summer to help us be more responsive.

Along with the pandemic, last summer's protests presented additional responsibilities for the agency. While the vast majority of protesters were peaceful, there were some who caused property damage to District businesses. DCRA assisted many of these businesses by helping to assess damage and by providing free materials to board up storefronts. And to help beautify our city, last summer DCRA teamed up with the Anacostia Business Improvement District to put up a new mural on an unsightly empty lot. Driving over the bridge on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, SE, just before you reach the traffic light at the intersection of Good Hope Road, you can't miss the bright blue 200-foot mural that now wraps around the corner. Transformed by public art, residents and visitors are now welcomed into the Ward 8 neighborhood with a visual timeline marking the proud past and present of the Anacostia Historic District.

DCRA Culture Change Initiative

The last area I want to highlight is the continued investment we are making to improve DCRA's culture. As I shared at our performance oversight hearing last year, in September 2019 we engaged an experienced firm to work with our employees and improve our culture. The firm started with a comprehensive survey and dozens of focus groups to better understand the needs of our workforce. As part of their work, the firm has provided our staff with individual career coaching sessions and has developed and led training on topics ranging from customer service to leadership. This past fall, every member our staff was offered the opportunity to take, and many did—including me—a Digital Quotient (DQ) Assessment designed to give us a better understanding of where our employees are in terms of digital proficiency. Once a benchmark was established, we were able to pinpoint opportunities for growth, and further develop training to build our collective skillsets in these areas.

It has been a challenging year for our city, and I cannot express enough how proud I am of our team at DCRA. Our employees have stepped up and delivered, whether that has meant working from home while balancing the needs of children, or being out in the field continuing to conduct inspections. As members of the Council, I suspect you mostly hear about our agency when something doesn't go right, and not enough from the 90 percent whom were satisfied with their interaction with DCRA. While there is always room for improvement, please let me assure you that the men and women of DCRA are committed public servants who should be commended for their hard work over the last year, despite a range of obstacles.

Conclusion

Chairman Mendelson and members of the Council, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As I conclude my testimony, I want to touch on the future of DCRA. While the ultimate configuration of the agency is up in the air, our job at DCRA is to keep our heads down and continue providing the best possible service to the District residents and businesses we serve. And to that end, I would encourage you to review our recently released five-year strategic plan. The plan was informed by a diverse range of stakeholders, including community leaders and advocates, industry experts, and our workforce. With this valuable input, we built the plan around three core values: Safety, Perpetual Improvement, and Transparency. To view the full plan, including all of the goals we have committed to and our timeline for completing them, I invite you to visit dcraFutureReady.com. With that, I am happy to address any questions you may have.