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Date: March 10, 2014
To: Tommy Wells, Chair
Committee on Public Safety and Judiciary
From: Rick Rosendall, President
Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance
Subject: Testimony on Office of Police Complaints

Please include this as testimony for the record on the Performance Oversight Hearing held by your committee on March 7, 2014.

I am Rick Rosendall, President of the Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance, which has been fighting for LGBT equality in the District since 1971.

The independent Office of Police Complaints (OPC) grew out of the recommendations of a task force in the late 1990s in which I represented GLAA. OPC employs the best practices of citizen oversight of law enforcement, with the goal of improving public confidence in the police. OPC Executive Director Philip K. Eure and his staff have shown expertise, integrity, and a commitment to fairness for all – not just those who file complaints, but those against whom they are filed, and the wider community from which both are drawn.

The Office of Police Complaints (OPC) released its Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2013 on March 4.¹ As it summarized in its news release:

OPC worked on 768 complaints, closing 456 of them. The agency also closed more complaints than it received for the third straight year.

In addition, 21 complaints were adjudicated this fiscal year, reflecting a 50 percent increase from the number adjudicated in Fiscal Year 2012. At least one allegation of misconduct was sustained in 15 of those 21 complaints.

OPC also mediated 29 complaints during FY13, of which 20 resulted in an agreement between the parties. Its complaint investigations included over 730 interviews that included nearly 350 police officers and more than 375 citizens. It produced almost 300 investigative reports. It also released two policy reports with recommendations for policing improvements; continued its outreach across the District; and hosted visitors from other nations.

We would like to see OPC strengthened so that it can do more investigations of systemic issues.

¹ Fiscal Year 2013 Annual Report, Office of Police Complaints, March 4, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/opc2013rpt>

There has recently been talk about the possible need to "overhaul" OPC and perhaps turn over all police misconduct investigations to MPD's Internal Affairs Bureau, presumably because they can generally do them faster. We oppose any such move. The last thing we want to do is remove OPC's independent investigative power, which is essential for maintaining and building public trust. We support changes recommended by OPC to strengthen police accountability, including legislation recommended on page 77 of the Fiscal Year 2013 OPC Annual Report as follows:

The agency's current authority should be expanded to include monitoring the number, types, and dispositions of citizen complaints investigated or otherwise resolved by MPD and DCHAPD.

The District Council should enact legislation to give OPC the authority to resolve some less serious complaints through a new Community Policing Rapid Response program.

We believe that OPC is still needed and generally works effectively, despite delays caused by funding and staff shortages. If anything, the recently released Report of the Hate Crimes Assessment Task Force² shows the need for more, rather than less, independent investigation of police-related complaints and review of police practices. Several LGBT organizations including GLAA will be issuing a joint letter in response to the Task Force report this week.

Thank you.

² "Report of the Hate Crimes Assessment Task Force," Metropolitan Police Department, <http://tinyurl.com/odxx5rn>