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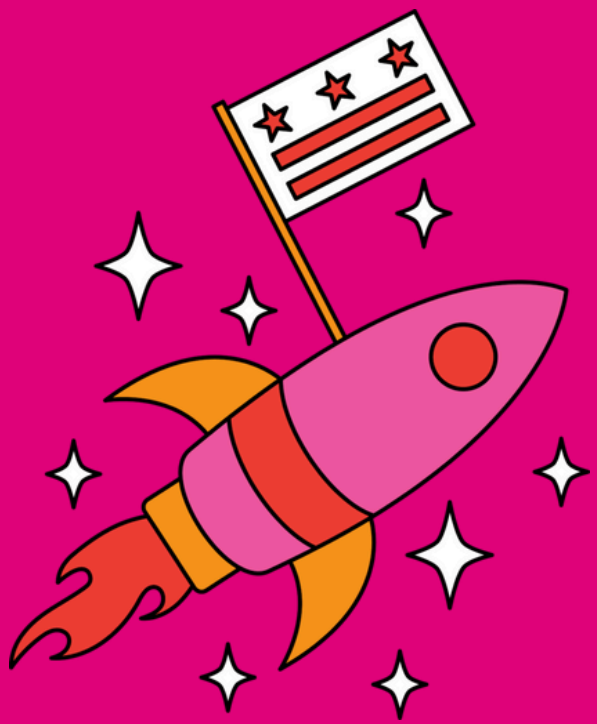
Policy Training Academy: 2023-2025 Impact Report



DC JUSTICE LAB.

This brief describes the Policy Training Academy, details the work of the graduates of the program, and reports participant feedback and reflections.

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Findings:

- All participants reported increased policymaking literacy.
- All participants showed growth in their understanding of the DC government.
- Participants expanded their understanding of how laws are passed and how to change policies without legislation.
- Participants learned key skills from each other and built stronger relationships.

1. Introduction and Summary: Policy Training Academy focuses on building civic skills for directly impacted native Washingtonians.

The Policy Training Academy is a week-long intensive program created by DC Justice Lab to empower local changemakers to transform legislation. The program reaches people who need to be involved in DC policymaking, but currently are not. Through a series of evidence-driven and community-rooted informational sessions, workshops, and discussions, the training seeks to give academy participants the resources and tools to engage in lawmaking processes in the District. Over the course of five days, participants receive hands-on support with research, writing, information design, advocacy strategies, as well as briefings on the workings of the justice and policymaking system. With local and national experts as faculty, participants learn not only how to advocate for themselves, but also how to effectively advocate for their community. During the week, participants develop public safety proposals to alter legislation or current policy and practice in an effort to increase prevention and reduce the negative consequences of policing, punishment, and prosecution. Following the training, advocates participate in the Community Safety Fair where they share their proposals directly with policymakers and the larger DC community.

Starting in 2023, DC Justice Lab has held three Policy Training Academies, with 38 people completing the training. The majority of participants were Black and native Washingtonians, and included victims of police violence, returning citizens, and family members of anyone with these experiences. From these three training academies, participants developed thirty-three unique policy proposals focused on changes to policing (six proposals), the system of punishment or its aftermath (ten proposals), crime prevention (sixteen proposals), and changes to the system of prosecution (one proposal).

DC Justice Lab measured the progress and reviewed feedback from the Policy Training Academy participants through daily surveys, pre- and post-session questionnaires, and short-answer written responses. Key findings from the 2025 pre- and post-surveys by participants showed participants gained:

- **Increased policymaker literacy:** Across the 17 different (pre- and post-test) questions, all seventeen measures showed some progress among participants towards their learning goals. *100% of participants reported increased policymaking literacy.*
- **Growth in understanding the structure of the DC government:** While more than half of participants responded that they did not know much (were "neutral") about the knowledge of the structure of the DC government, by the end of the training, 9 out of 10 participants strongly agreed with the statement: *I understand the structure of the DC government.* On average, participants saw growth after the training around their understanding of the role of the mayor, the DC Council, DC agencies, and the federal government, as well as an increase in their understanding of how advocates can interact with lawmaking or the policymaking process.
- **Deeper understanding of how the legislative process works:** Whereas at the outset of the training, half of participants said they were neutral on the question, *"I understand how a law is passed in the District,"* over the course of the training, the number of participants who strongly agreed that they now understand how laws are passed more than doubled, and nearly all participants agreed or strongly agreed they understand how a law is passed.
- **Increased understanding of how policies can change without new laws, and their knowledge of key policymaking tools grew:** Before the training, half of the participants said they were unfamiliar or did not know much (were neutral) about how policies and practices can change without legislation. By the end of the training, 70% said they strongly agreed with the statement, *"I understand how policies and practices can change without legislation."* On average, participants showed growth around their ability to "identify system-level problems and solutions," and showed "confidence" that they could plan a campaign. On average, participants saw growth around their knowledge of how to conduct research online, increased confidence in

using data for advocacy, greater preparedness on media interviews, and more knowledge on how to use story-telling for advocacy.

- **Increased community and relationships with other participants:** Before the training, very few of the participants knew each other. By the end of the training, more than 70% said they were familiar with their fellow training participants.

2. Who are the Policy Training Academy participants and how are they associated with the DC policy change community?

For the Policy Training Academy (the last 3 years), participants were recruited through a targeted outreach effort to organizations. Organizations nominated individuals for the training that fit the criteria: participants need to be DC residents, are actively participating in local community efforts, and are impacted by the criminal legal system. Directly impacted people include victims of law enforcement violence, those who have experienced police harassment or profiling, those who are returning citizens, or a family member of anyone with these experiences. The nomination and recruitment process focused on DC natives, Black residents, and/or residents of Wards 8, 7, and 5, as well as communities and individuals that are more likely to have experienced violence and come into contact with the justice system.

Of the 13 participants who attended the Policy Training Academy in 2025:

- 10 were DC natives.
- While participants were not requested to state their race, ethnicity, or gender, staff assessed that nine were Black, two were Latinx, one was Asian, and six were women.
- There were eight residents of Ward 5, 7, and 8, three residents of Ward 4, one resident of Ward 1, and one resident of Ward 3.

The Academy's graduates described themselves as representing, members of, or otherwise affiliated with organizations that work with returning citizens, violent crime victims, organizations that work on violence prevention, and other political organizations in DC. In 2025, participants were involved in organizations that included, A Mother's Hug, Lift the City, More Than Our Crimes, Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, DC Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, Bread for the City, Fair Budget Coalition, Ward 5 Mutual Aid, Save Chinatown Solidarity Network DC, Mothers Outreach Network, Harriet's Wildest Dreams, Peace for DC, Lifepieces to Masterpieces, the Alliance of Concerned Men, Women involved in ReEntry Network [The Wire], Dreaming Out Loud, Mute the Violence DC and Training Grounds, Inc.

3. What types of training did Policy Training Academy participants receive, and what types of safety proposals were developed?

The Policy Training Academy was broken up into five days, and each day focused on a theme of training and learning goals that participants should be working towards. Throughout the five-day training, participants learned:

- **How to identify problems, solutions, and the structure of the system:** participants learned how to identify system-level issues or problems and solutions to those problems, as well as the structure and local decision-makers of the criminal legal system.
- **Research skills:** participants learned how essential research is to policy advocacy, and how to be critical consumers of information, while also learning how to conduct research.
- **How the policymaking process works and how to influence it:** participants learned how laws are made, how policies and practices can change without legislation, and how advocates can interact with the process. Participants also learned how to influence a policymaker and how to create a

presentation that can be used to advocate for their goals.

- **Campaign planning and organizing:** participants learned how to plan for a campaign, and developed skills for building power through community organizing.
- **Communications, messaging, and media skills:** participants learned the importance of a compelling narrative in policy advocacy, how to craft effective messaging, and how to interact with the media.

Each day covered a different set of topics, and on each day, participants applied what they learned to the development of policy topics and a policy proposal that they wished to launch a campaign around. Individuals could work on proposals together or alone. Each day, a group of instructors, including DCJL staff and experts from the city and country, worked with participants throughout the week on these topics and goals. The trainers included members of DC Justice Lab who had previously worked for a DC Councilmember, staff with in-depth expertise on the DC Criminal Code, staff who had conducted research on DC policy issues for multiple organizations, and experts on information design and the law. Trainers also included experts on these topics from other organizations including, Reframe Health and Justice, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, The Sentencing Project, the Center for Third World Organizing, the Washington Literacy Center, African American Roundtable and LiberateMKE, Voices Unbarred, Rise Public Strategies, and FAMM.

Across the three training academies, participants developed thirty-three unique policy proposals targeting changes to crime prevention (16 proposals), the system of punishment or its aftermath (10 proposals), policing (6 proposals), and changes to the system of prosecution (1 proposal). In 2025, thirteen participants worked on thirteen individual policy proposals. Of these, 7 focused on prevention, 4 on repairing harm to the individual or the community caused by punishment, and 2 on holding police accountable or addressing the impact of police violence.

By way of example, a sampling of law, policy, and practice changes that participants developed as part of their proposals targeted:

Policing:

- The creation of an application to map out the cost for taxpayers, and understanding what the cost is for a police deployment.
- The creation of a new pathway so that parents can more easily file wrongful death claims if their children are victims of police violence.

Punishment:

- Alternatives to incarceration that have to be exhausted before a primary caregiver of a child or parent is removed from the home.
- Incentivize supermarkets to hire returning citizens by covering grocery delivery costs for SNAP recipients in stores that hire these individuals.

Prevention:

- Peer mentorship programs that focus on educating young people about the impact and ways to address childhood trauma.
- An approach to addressing young adults' needs in the community to reduce the likelihood of violence.

4. What skills, experiences, and knowledge did participants draw from the Policy Training Academy?

Methodology: DC Justice Lab measured the progress and feedback from Policy Training Academy participants through daily surveys and pre- and post-session questionnaires consisting of 17 questions. The daily surveys provided narrative statements for participants to select based on questions they were asked at the end of each day, and the pre- and post-session questioners asked individuals to rank (on a scale of 0-5) responses to 17 questions. These responses were then analyzed and presented in this brief in two ways:

1. Responses were anonymously coded, analyzed, and graphed, with an emphasis on participant change over time. For the most representative data information, a stacked column chart with an average trendline representing Policy Training Academy responses

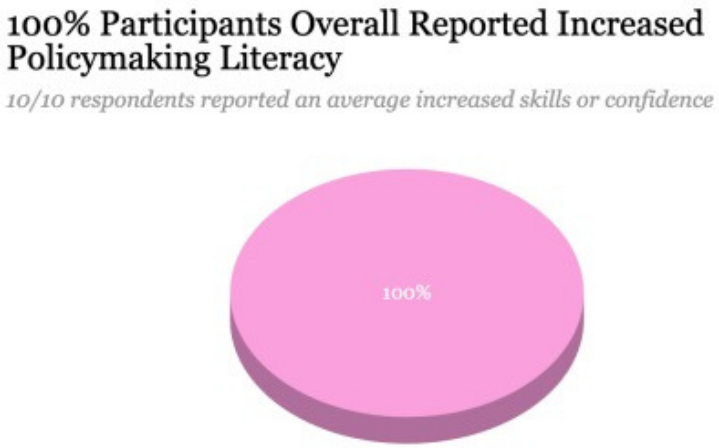
was used. These are represented in the graphics below.

2. The pre- and post- training day responses for a particular question, ranging from 0-5, were averaged for all participants who completed the surveys. These were represented as a percentage change between the pre-survey and the post-survey.

Findings and Takeaways:

1. All participants reported increased policymaking literacy.

All participants of DC Justice Lab's 2025 Policy Training Academy reported increased literacy in the policymaking process and substantially broadened networking cohorts. On average, and based on individual responses, respondents felt they gained significant skill and confidence upon completion of the training. In fact, many of the lowest literacy and confidence levels expressed by participants in their initial survey responses became the strongest literacies upon graduation from the Policy Training Academy. Across the 17 different questions from pre- and post-session questionnaires, all questions saw growth in the number of participants who said they increased their knowledge, skills, or relationships towards a daily learning goal.



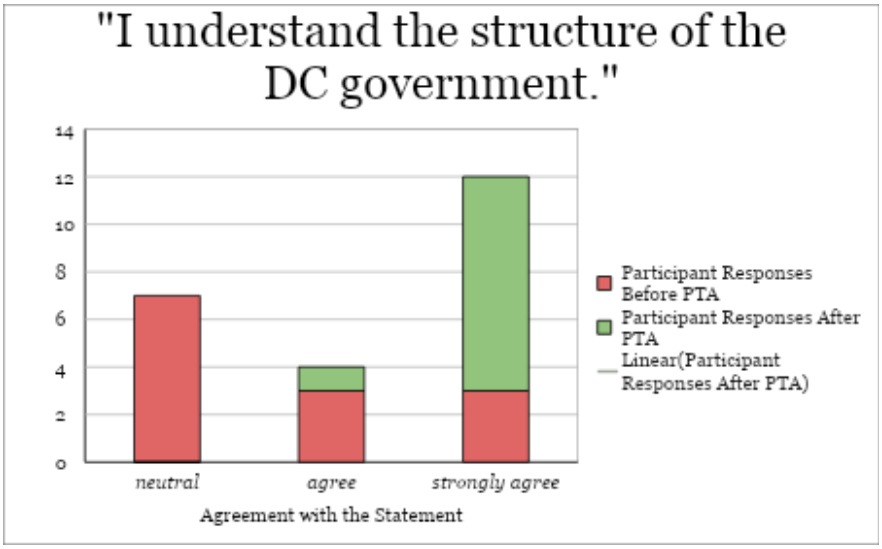
- *"I want to create something similar in encouraging others to write their own policy and to push [it] to the DC Council." – Participant*
- *"I am an advocate, [and] this training is evolving my knowledge and is empowering me to continue and to add tools on how to fight." – Participant*
- *"DCJL has built a lot of trust with me during this week; I feel confident that we participants will be adequately prepared if we continue to participate actively in the daily activities." – Participant*
- *"I have more information about how to galvanize people around my policy and what the strategizing, organizing, and mobilizing looks like." – Participant*

When asked to give a numerical rank between 0 and 5 in response to a question, the average score for all participants improved between pre- and post-surveys around core themes that relate to their understanding of policymaking literacy:

- 15% growth → *"I can identify system-level problems and solutions."*
- 13% growth → *"I feel confident speaking with people I know about issues that are important to me."*
- 15% growth → *"I feel confident that I can plan a campaign."*

2. All participants showed growth in their understanding of the DC government, illustrated by the following participant samples:

As part of the Policy Training Academy, participants engaged in two training days focused on how the DC government works. They focused on the legislative process, the executive branch, and the nature of the federal government's role in the public safety system. On a broader examination of legislative literacy, participants of the Policy Training Academy significantly increased their confidence in understanding the structure of the DC government as a whole. More than half of respondents (53.8%) stated neutrality on knowledge of the subject at the beginning of the survey. By the end of the Academy, 90% (9 out of 10 respondents) stated that they "strongly agree" with the statement: *"I understand the structure of the DC government."*



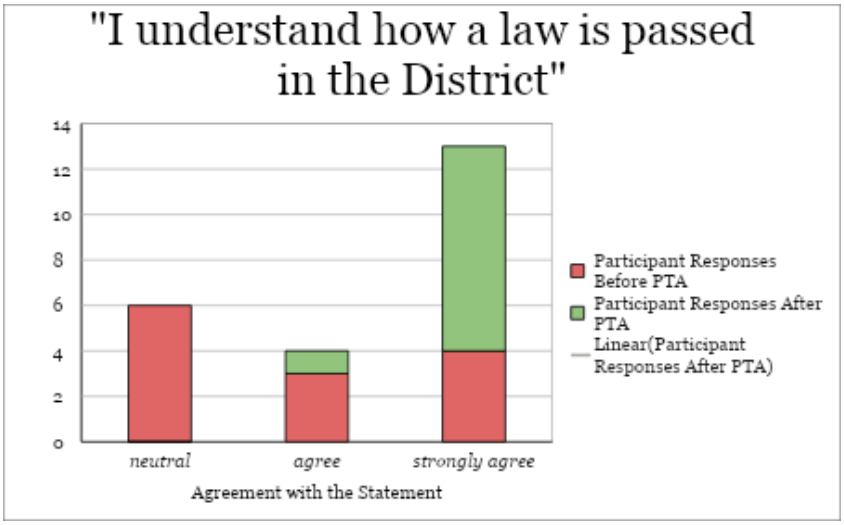
- *"I now know how to go about the components needed before bringing an issue to the attention of the DC Council." – Participant*
- *"I am an advocate, and I have been doing a lot of work on this space. I learned a lot about how the government works in DC, who is over what committees on the city council, which will make me a more [effective] advocate." – Participant*
- *"Drafting legislation is a lot like bargaining. Initially, I was trying to draft a solution that would be most palatable to all instead of starting with my ultimate goal and then being prepared to barter down." – Participant*

When asked to give a numerical rank between 0 and 5 in response to a question, the average score for all participants improved between pre- and post-surveys around core themes that relate to their understanding of how to change policy in the District:

- 27% growth → *"I understand how a law is passed in the District."*
- 13% growth → *"I understand the role of the Mayor, DC Council, DC agencies and the federal government."*
- 25% growth → *"I understand how advocates can interact with the lawmaking or policymaking process."*

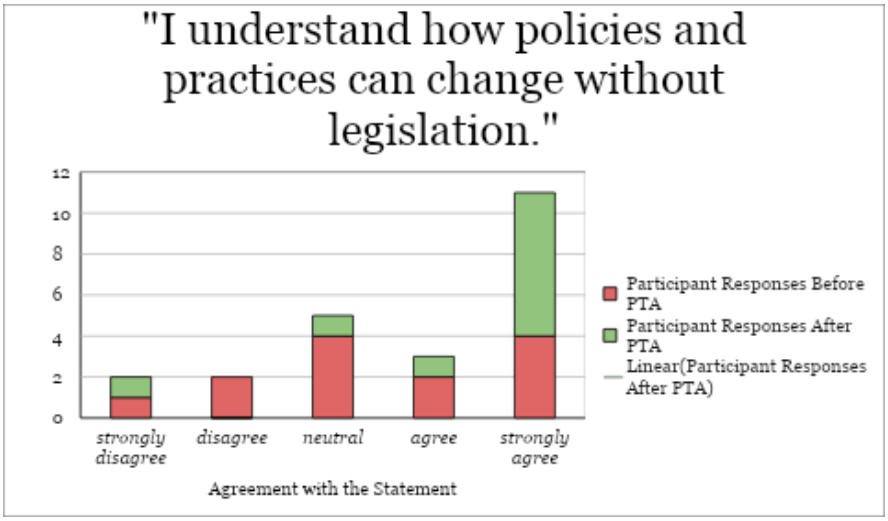
3. Participants expanded their understanding of how laws are passed and how to change policies without legislation.

The Policy Training Academy walked participants through several sessions where they learned how concepts turn into legislation and how draft laws move through the legislative process. At the outset of the training, half of the participants said they were neutral on the statement: *"I understand how a law is passed in the District."* After the training, nearly all participants "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement. In addition, almost all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they now understood how a law is passed, with the number of those who "strongly agree" more than doubling by the end of the training.



- *"[Which session was most helpful, and why?]. How government works. It gave me fact based insight not subjective musings."*—Participant
- *"I now have a better understanding of how to really position my research to support the things that I may be advocating for and then how to [concisely] present it."* – Participant
- *"I work with those directly impacted by the carceral and justice system and knowing where the power lies in order to change it and advocate in that area that will best benefit the community I serve."* – Participant
- *"I can use the research methods taught today to provide facts, and [understand] who I'm trying to appeal to."* – Participant

The training did not just focus on legislative change. Trainers designed sessions to build skills around research, communications, and how participants can influence agencies and actors to change policy and practices in the justice system without passing a bill. More than half of respondents (53.8%) said they were unfamiliar or neutral on the concept of how to change policies without legislation before the Academy. By the end of the training, 70% said that they "strongly agree" with the statement: *"I understand how policies and practices can change without legislation."*

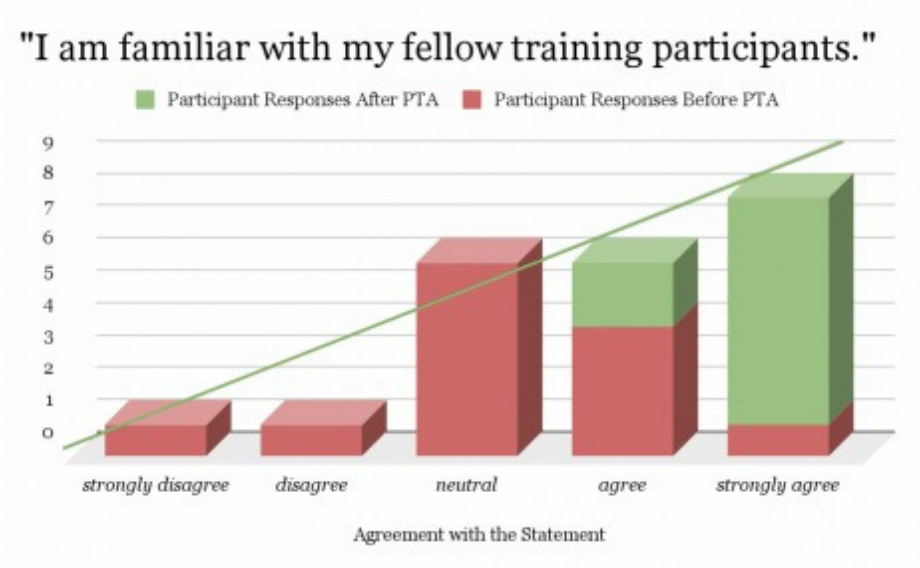


Participants learned and heard concrete examples of how research, communications, and advocacy skills are used to change laws, policies, and practices. The participants learned technical skills around research and developing a persuasive message to influence policymakers. When asked to give a numerical rank between 0 and 5, the average score for all participants improved between pre- and post-surveys on questions about research and communications skills individuals were trained on to change policy without legislation:

- 13% growth →*"I know how to research online and feel comfortable doing it."*
- 15% growth → *"I feel confident using data for advocacy."*
- 11% growth → *"I feel prepared to be interviewed by the media."*
- 9% growth →*"I know how to use story-telling for advocacy."*

4. Participants learned key skills from each other and built stronger relationships with each other.

One goal of the Policy Training Academy was to create a learning environment and a sense of community among the participants so they may, if they choose, continue to work together more effectively on their individual campaigns or joint projects. Upon completion of the Academy, participants reported stronger relationships with each other, DC Justice Lab, and other DC justice policy entities. Between the pre-training survey and the post-training survey, more than 70% of participants indicated they increased their network and association with each other, responding to the statement: *"I am more familiar with my fellow training participants."*



- *"I received some great ideas from others."* – Participant
- *"I learned more about a new participant and how much we were involved in similar organizations."* – Participant
- *"I learned [how] some people feel when something in their community is being built without the full consent of all the people affected by the project."* – Participant

Participants also indicated that they learned concrete information from their fellow participants that they did not have before the training. Some of the answers from participants in the daily exit survey to the question, *"[w]hat is one thing you learned from another participant?"* include:

- *"How DC's practice of sending inmates so far away can itself be a traumatizing experience."*
- *"That while gun violence is primarily conducted by those within the 18-36 year old range, the teen years prior to that set the stage."*
- *"I learned about the need for diversion and mentorship inside the DC Jail."*

Conclusion: Policy Training Academy participants are using their skills in the field and continue to work with each other.

The Policy Training Academy formally ends each year with a Community Safety Fair, an event on the Saturday following the week-long training, where participants present their policy change proposals to policymakers on poster boards, delivering their proposal "elevator pitch" to attendees. In the past three years, the Attorney General, the Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia, other Council members or their staff, and the Chief Judge for the Superior Court have all attended the Community Safety Fair. The participants' family members, friends, and personal supporters also attend the graduation.

The training available by the Academy does not end with the presentations at the Community Safety Fair. Following the Policy Training Academy, participants join an email listserv with past participants and DCJL staff. For the last three years, this online community has presented opportunities to join other learning programs consistent with the goals of the training and has maintained a sense of community among its members.

As part of the daily exit surveys conducted in 2025, here is how some participants responded to the question: *"What do you still want to learn more about, and why?"*

- *"The factors that come into play once a council member has introduced my bill."*
- *"How to lobby so that I can lobby Congress."*

- *"Continuing to learn how to put together a policy proposal and campaign to push it."*
- *"More about home rule and make it stronger or better. Also create a way to stop DC council to overturn DC voting on policy such as term limits."*
- *"I still want to learn more about how to really build a campaign around a policy and how to target the messaging to the stakeholders to make it as effective as possible."*
- *"Just continuing to build as we're already doing. It's such a good structure."*

The thirty-eight participants in the Policy Training Academy work with dozens of local organizations on issues related to policing, prosecution, prevention, and punishment. Some participants run their own organizations and some individuals work towards policy change under different banners. Of note, in the three years since the Policy Training Academy trainings began, participants have been working on efforts to:

- Engage Del. Holmes Norton in an effort to keep people sentenced to prison under DC code offenses in facilities closer to DC.
- Kept funds in the 2025 budget to continue the work of the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs.
- Publish multiple opinion articles in media outlets on the topics of sustaining community violence interruption funds, restoring local control over parole decisions, and recommending ways to improve reentry services.
- Serve in the Constituent Leadership Program run by the Fair Budget Coalition, which has selected multiple graduates from the Policy Training Academy.

In summary, the impact of the Policy Training Academy extends far beyond the one-week program, and there is evidence that graduates of the Academy will be change agents in the District of Columbia for years to come.

About the organization.

DC Justice Lab is a nonprofit advocacy organization that congregates a team of law and policy experts to make the District safer, freer, and more equal. They specialize in evidence-driven and community-focused approaches to reducing crime and violence in the city. The DC Justice Lab is committed to providing tangible solutions to native Washingtonian concerns, with an emphasis on honoring the expressed interests, agency, and capacity of marginalized populations. With an intersectional and multidisciplinary approach, DC Justice Lab organizes the District's changemakers to create long-lasting, large-scale societal transformation (dcjusticelab.org).

About the researcher.

Audrey Vi Morrison is an undergraduate student at Christopher Newport University pursuing a degree in Criminology and Writing. At CNU, she works as a researcher at the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology. She has presented her mixed-methods work concerning diversity, equity, and systemic issues within the police-industrial complex at the Southern Sociological Society's 2024 Annual Conference. She looks forward to finding her role in the criminal justice and public policy world.

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