

**Public Oversight Roundtable on the  
Status of the District's Low Barrier, Transitional and  
Permanent Supportive Housing Programs  
Committee on Human Services  
Tommy Wells, Chair  
June 25, 2010**

Good morning. My name is Marta Beresin and I am a staff attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, a privately funded not-for-profit organization that provides legal representation to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. We also advocate on a range of policy and agency reform issues related to homelessness and poverty. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts with the Committee on Human Services today and will speak primarily concerning homeless families.

I have worked with homeless families in the District for over 10 years and in that time have been proud that the District's policy and practice has been to place every family in shelter or housing who had no safe place to sleep, regardless of the weather. I always believed that sheltering "tier 1" families, as they are referred to, was a policy based on the moral belief that respecting the human dignity of every child requires us to safeguard their lives. If we can prevent it and know about, we have refused to allow a child to come home from school to a car, to a domestic violence situation, to a park bench, a metro station, or a hallway.

Until now that is. As of earlier this week there were 19 families in the "tier 1" category whom the Department of Human Services ("DHS") could not shelter. This number will continue to rise unless something is done immediately. DC General has been full for weeks. DHS has worked hard to find other solutions for each tier 1 family but does not have the necessary resources to place any more families in shelter.<sup>1</sup> Since 2008, when the recession first hit, family homelessness has skyrocketed by 36.3%<sup>2</sup> in the District, but the Council and Mayor have failed to adequately fund shelter and housing programs for families and the Administration has refused thus far to respond to the current crisis by reprogramming funding.<sup>3</sup> Families continue to be turned away daily by the Family Resource Center, which has been overwhelmed with applications for shelter.

Some of the families we have spoken with in recent weeks include a mom with three small children who waited all day at the Family Resource Center only to be told that the Center could not see her because they had too many other applicants that day. She left not knowing where they would go that night. Another mom we met had a young son and they both had slept outside the Deanwood Metro station one night, but were still told the following day that there was no room in shelter. Another mom we met recently went to the Family Resource Center the

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<sup>1</sup> Housing solutions take time and not all families qualify for a subsidy: Federal Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program ("HPRP") funding has not been enough to stem the tide of families needing shelter because only working families qualify for the program and finding a unit, leasing up, and getting the funding to the landlord all takes time.

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2010 Point in Time Survey, family homelessness in DC has risen 13% since just last year.

<sup>3</sup> Permanent Supportive Housing slots for families are 100% full until October 1. And System Transformation Initiative ("STI") and Local Rent Supplement Program ("LRSP") slots are 100% full and there will be no new slots in FY 2011 because these programs were flat-funded for next year.

day she was evicted. She got there at 1:00, waited four hours, and was never seen for intake. She spent the night riding the trains and sleeping at Union Station with her third grader and toddler. And last month a mom contacted me who, following the loss of her home through foreclosure, had been staying in her car for 10 days with her three sons, including a teenager, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader and an infant. This working mom would get her children from school and day care each day and take them back to sleep in her car. Imagine putting your 7 month old baby to sleep each night in your car. Or being a teenager and going to school each day after spending the night sleeping in a car. This mom had been to the Family Resource Center but, like the others, had been told there was no room in shelter for her. How many more stories like these must be heard before our city leaders take action?

Our city's youngest residents do not deserve to sleep outside under any circumstances. With double unemployment over the last two years, family homelessness is expected to continue to rise. This requires a different approach than "business as usual."

We urge the District to take the following steps immediately to resolve this crisis:

- 1) Develop a short-term solution for the dozens of families who are being forced to risk their own and their children's health or life while they wait for open space in shelters. We recommend that hotel vouchers be used for each tier 1 family before a tragedy occurs<sup>4</sup>;
- 2) Reprogram \$375,000<sup>5</sup> to DHS to place 100 families in apartments with LRSP or STI subsidies, relieving some of the pressure in the shelters and allowing new families to come in; and
- 3) Take a close look at the numbers to ensure that the hypothermia plan for families reflects the 13% rise in family homelessness over last year and the fact that DC General was about 50% over capacity for most of last winter.

Times of crisis call for bold leadership and we hope the vulnerable children and families of the District can count on you to address this serious situation with immediate action.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>4</sup> DHS has used hotel vouchers for homeless families who lose their housing from the condemnation process or fires, and the Office of Victim Services ("OVS") uses hotel vouchers regularly for families who become homeless due to domestic violence. We do not see another solution that is fast enough to prevent tragedy for families who become homeless due to job loss, illness, disabilities, or other causes unrelated to domestic violence, fires, or condemnation.

<sup>5</sup> \$375,000 is enough funding to subsidize apartments for 100 families from July 1 through the end of the fiscal year. Additional funds would be needed for case management services if the subsidies were STI rather than LRSP vouchers. This is based on the LRSP subsidy cost of \$15,000 per family per year. The recurring cost of these 100 subsidies would be just \$1.5 million in FY 2011.