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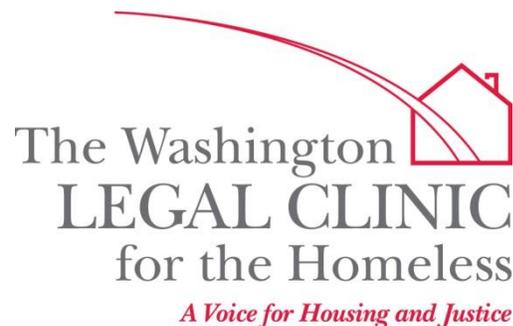
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**Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services
Roundtable on the Department of Human Services' Rapid Re-Housing Program
Presented by Max Tipping
December 14, 2017**

Good morning Councilmember Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. Thank you for holding this roundtable. My name is Max Tipping and I am a Spitzer Fellow at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. The Legal Clinic envisions – and since 1987 has worked towards – a just and inclusive community for all residents of the District of Columbia, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive.

I recently spoke with a family who was “exited” from rapid re-housing several months ago. Their income is not enough to cover the market rent, and, as a result, they now owe the landlord nearly \$9,000. They haven’t left the unit because they have nowhere else to go. The sense of being trapped, that eviction and a return to homelessness are inevitable, hangs over them like a fog of anxiety and depression. So too does the debt, which will remain on their credit indefinitely, undermining their chances of securing another apartment.

You may think I am describing one of the families whom rapid re-housing failed, but you would be wrong. According to the Administration, this family is a success story, and their story is far from exceptional. I know other “success stories” who abandoned their unit before being sued for eviction to go sleep on a friend’s living room floor. Others held out for as long as possible, even after their utilities were disconnected, relying on friends in order to bathe their children or cook a meal. All of them are included in the oft-cited “85 percent successful” figure, which cares only whether a family re-enters the shelter system.

The absurdity of what is clearly failure being counted as success may initially be troubling, but to discuss rapid re-housing is to enter a world where policy is directed by such euphemisms and doublethink. Where the words “permanent” and “time-limited” are used in the same breath without even a hint of contradiction. Where “affordable” and “severe rent burden” become indistinguishable, as families on a fixed income are required to pay up to 60 percent of that income towards rent, not including utilities. Where a family with \$150 in monthly income taking on full legal responsibility for over \$1300 in monthly rent is a “successful exit to permanent housing.” In that sense, the fact that the

primary measure of success is indifferent to the real-world experiences of families – the evictions, the instability, the debt, the trauma – is not necessarily all that surprising.

None of this is to say that data is not important. In fact, I would argue for more consistent and rigorous data collection and analysis. But data is meaningless, or downright misleading, if you don't ask the right question. At a minimum, I hope you would agree that the question of success must include whether families can pay their rent after the program ends. For example, one question that has been asked but never meaningfully answered is what is the rent burden of families at the time they exit the program?¹ In other words, what is their income relative to their rent obligation after the subsidy ends? Such a measurement is not a matter of debate, just a matter of arithmetic. If a family's income is less than or equal to their rent, instability is the obvious and inevitable result.

Of course I recognize that you've heard all of this before.² The continued housing instability I've just described has been an open secret for years among nearly everyone who interacts with rapid re-housing, from landlords to participants to case managers to eviction defense attorneys. Nothing I've said is substantively different from the testimony you heard at the DHS performance oversight hearing on March 15, or the DHS budget hearing on May 3, or the hearing on the HSRA bill on June 14. I could argue that a rapid re-housing cliff is just as illogical as a TANF cliff. That short-term programs offer only short-term solutions, and that the District should refocus on long-term housing programs. But none of that is new. Similarly, families in the program have done everything they can to make you aware of their struggles. Nearly 20 families submitted testimony on the HSRA bill in June, sharing the deeply personal stories of their time in rapid re-housing in the hope that it will make things better for the next family in the program.

At the end of the day, it does not matter what we say, or even what you say. The only thing that matters is what you, our elected representatives, are willing to *do* to make things better for families in rapid re-housing. Are you willing to put adequate legal protections in place so that families don't end up worse off after their time in the program? Are you willing to invest the necessary resources in truly affordable housing programs, where the math works and families are successful by any measure? While I remain hopeful that the answer to these questions is yes, for now the status quo remains unchanged, and families continue to suffer as a result. With the hope that the time for talk is finally over, and that now is the time for action, I would like to cede my remaining time. I am happy to answer any questions about how to make things better for the hundreds of families in this program.

¹ Responses to Fiscal Year 2015-2016 Performance Oversight Questions, DC Department of Human Services, February 2016, page 34, available at http://dccouncil.us/files/user_uploads/budget_responses/DHSResponsestoFY1516PerformanceOversightQuestions.pdf; Responses to Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Performance Oversight Questions, DC Department of Human Services, March 2017, page 35, available at http://dccouncil.us/files/user_uploads/budget_responses/DHS_FY16-17_POH_Pre-Hearing_Questions_FINAL.pdf.

² Set up to fail, Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, May 2017, available at <http://www.legalclinic.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Set-up-to-fail-FINAL.pdf>.