



May 3, 2017

Honorable Brianne K. Nadeau  
Council of the District of Columbia  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 102  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Councilmember Nadeau:

We, the undersigned organizations, are writing regarding the District of Columbia's rapid re-housing program for homeless families with children. As the Committee on Human Services considers Mayor Bowser's FY 2018 budget proposal, we are deeply concerned that the District is continuing to invest substantial resources in temporary rental subsidies through rapid re-housing. We firmly believe that these resources would be better invested in long-term rental subsidies. We know that you care deeply about the safety and stability of all District residents, and that you will do everything possible to prevent families from continuously cycling in and out of homelessness.

As you know, rapid re-housing has grown tremendously in the last five years, and is now the District's primary means of moving homeless families out of shelter. There are currently more than 4,000 people in the program, most of whom are children. For years, our organizations have witnessed the pain and trauma caused by this deeply flawed program. Our attorneys have worked with scores of families living with severe housing code violations, or facing eviction because their rapid re-housing subsidies ended and they could not afford the market rent. A recent report by the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless highlighted the many problems that we have seen with the District's rapid re-housing program, which, rather than setting families up for stable long-term housing, cycles many of them through short-term, and often substandard housing, before sending them right back into homelessness. The report, *SET UP TO FAIL*, shows how the families that we worked with were not merely falling through unseen cracks in the program, but were carelessly dropped over a rapid re-housing cliff.

The most consistent and troubling patterns include:

### **Unsafe Housing**

Most families in the program struggle with poor housing conditions, from flooding to rodents to mold to no working heat all winter. Many are forced to rent from known slumlords like Sanford Capital, which received more than \$100,000 in these DC-funded rental subsidies in November 2016 alone. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 13. There are few mechanisms in the program for holding landlords accountable and ensuring that families have safe and decent housing. The program also lacks clear, consistently-applied standards for allowing or helping families to relocate, and because the program is time-limited, families lack the leverage to get meaningful repairs made through filing a complaint in housing conditions court.

## **Barriers to Stability**

Families in rapid re-housing are forced to pay as much as 60 percent of their limited incomes towards the rent each month, not including utilities, which is more than double the standard measure of housing affordability. Coupled with the fact that the program will sometimes fail to pay its portion of the rent, many families end up owing money to their landlords. Rapid re-housing is supposed to stabilize families, but about 45 percent of families that have been in the program for at least one year have ended up in eviction court while they are still receiving assistance. *SET UP TO FAIL*, pages 14-15.

## **The Rapid Re-housing Cliff**

On average, the entire monthly income of a family in rapid re-housing is only enough to cover 40 percent of the market rent for their apartment, and only 10 percent of participating families increased their income in FY 2016. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 16. As a result, when the subsidy is cut off, families face a financial cliff and many cycle back into homelessness. Since May of 2016, more than 300 families have been sent over this cliff because they exceeded an arbitrary time limit in the program. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 16. Of the families that exited from the program in December and January for any reason, not just time limits, 25 percent had already been sued for eviction by March. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 16. Many other families likely moved out to avoid an eviction and damaging their credit.

## **Illusory Success**

While proponents of rapid re-housing often claim that the program is 85 percent successful, a more accurate figure is likely only half that, with about 42 percent of families able to maintain their housing independently for one year after the subsidy ends. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 23.

These findings mirror the experiences of the many families in rapid re-housing that we have worked with over the years. Given these issues with the rapid re-housing program, we respectfully request that you:

### **1. Reallocate the \$3.8 million increase that the Mayor is seeking for rapid re-housing in FY 2018 towards LRSP housing vouchers for the Targeted Affordable Housing (“TAH”) program.**

Rather than continuing to increase investments in a flawed program, DC should refocus on funding long-term affordable housing as the solution to family homelessness. As seen in the report, the cost of providing LRSP vouchers to homeless families would only be about 6.2 percent more expensive than the current rapid re-housing based system over five years, but would provide families with real housing stability. *SET UP TO FAIL*, page 28. We ask that the Mayor’s proposed \$3.8 million increase for rapid re-housing be shifted to TAH housing vouchers for families that are currently in rapid re-housing. Reallocating these funds would also get the District closer to actually meeting the need for \$10 million in funding for TAH for homeless families this year, as identified by the Fair Budget Coalition.

### **2. Join us in calling for a moratorium on time limit terminations until the Council has had a chance to fully consider and weigh in on this practice.**

More than 300 families have been terminated due to time limits in the last 18 months. This practice appears to be directly contrary to DC law, which does not allow for homeless services to be terminated based on time limits. Nearly 700 families in rapid re-housing are currently at risk of termination because

they have exceeded an arbitrary assistance cap for the program. The Council has never had an opportunity to fully consider whether such practices fit with our community's values. We are calling for a moratorium on such terminations to allow the Council time to provide a clear standard for when, or whether, families should be sent over the rapid re-housing cliff. A roundtable on the program would likely be a good first step towards understanding the human cost of the current system. We know that you have been one of the strongest supporters of reforming TANF so that families do not face an arbitrary cliff. We hope you will join us in calling for a halt to rapid re-housing's arbitrary cliff until you and other Councilmembers have a chance to decide whether it actually reflects DC values.

We would very much like to meet with you to discuss these requests and how to better serve the 1,350 families in this program. Please contact Max Tipping at [max.tipping@legalclinic.org](mailto:max.tipping@legalclinic.org) or (202) 328-5514 with any questions relating to these requests. Thank you for your continued dedication to DC's homeless and nearly homeless families.

Sincerely,

**Bread for the City**  
**Children's Law Center**  
**DC Law Students in Court**  
**Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**  
**Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless**

cc:

Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Anita Bonds, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable David Grosso, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Elissa Silverman, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Robert White, Jr., Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Jack Evans, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Mary M. Cheh, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Brandon T. Todd, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Kenyan McDuffie, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Charles Allen, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Vincent C. Gray, Council of the District of Columbia  
Honorable Trayon White, Sr., Council of the District of Columbia

Honorable Muriel Bowser, Mayor of the District of Columbia  
Laura Zeilinger, Director, Department of Human Services