

DCHA Budget Hearing
Councilmember Michael Brown, Chairperson
April 18, 2012, 11:00 a.m.
Testimony of Will Merrifield
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Will Merrifield, and I am a Staff Attorney with the Affordable Housing Initiative at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH). The mission of the Affordable Housing Initiative is to preserve and expand the supply of affordable housing through legal representation of tenants and tenant associations, as well as through policy advocacy. I am here today to testify about the importance of addressing the current housing crisis faced by an overwhelming number of DC residents by investing in the Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP).

The District is facing a historic housing crisis for families, and it has responded to this increase in need for affordable housing by adding to its emergency shelter inventory at DC General, by placing families in expensive hotel rooms, and by refusing to serve any families facing a housing crisis outside of the winter season. These costly measures have served as band aids for a crisis to which the only solution is housing.

From 2008 to 2011, family homelessness in DC increased by 46%, and just in the last year, it increased by a striking 138%. As of April 1, 2012, there were 213 families in motels, 273 families at DC General, 148 families in temporary shelter, and 308 families on the shelter waiting lists. Moreover, the housing wait list for both families and individuals is excruciatingly long.

These numbers have coincided with a systemic shortfall in the funding of programs such as LRSP that provide long-term affordable housing to District residents. Unfortunately, the Mayor's proposed budget for FY 2013 continues this trend by failing to address the ongoing crisis in affordable housing. The proposed budget does not fund programs that help people leave emergency shelter, it does not reduce the DC Housing authority waiting list, and it does not provide new resources to create more affordable housing for low income residents of the District.

One alarming aspect of the Mayor's budget is the potential elimination the Local Rent Supplement Program. Specifically, the proposed budget prohibits the Housing Authority from re-issuing vouchers to new residents once participants leave the program. This policy of losing vouchers through attrition could effectively phase out the program altogether.

The devastating consequences of such a policy include an exacerbation of the growing homelessness crisis in the District. Without meaningful investment in long term affordable housing, we can expect more men, women, and children sleeping on the streets and seeking emergency services from an already overburdened shelter system.

Not only is this morally wrong, but it's also fiscally irresponsible.

Housing is the only solution to homelessness. Fundamentally, the creation and preservation of housing solutions like the Local Rent Supplement Program serve to both stabilize people in the short term and allow them to eventually move off of subsidies in the long term by providing the stability necessary to seek and retain meaningful employment.

Conversely, if the District continues to cut and underfund affordable housing, it will continue to overspend dollars on emergency services while the number of homeless residents continues to grow.

Housing is the foundation of our communities, and this budget does nothing to meet our community's housing needs. It is up to the Council to remedy this egregious and short-sighted wrong by making investments across the continuum of housing that are both cost-effective and proven to work --- investments in programs like LRSP.

Thank you for your time and attention.