

**Testimony before the Comprehensive Housing Strategy Task Force
Monday, October 22, 2012, 6pm**

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Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Misty Thomas and I am a Staff Attorney with the Affordable Housing Initiative at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. For the past 25 years, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless has advocated for justice for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the District of Columbia. The Legal Clinic has become a principal force in protecting the rights of homeless and other low-income people here in the District, through a unique combination of direct representation, impact litigation, policy and budget advocacy, community outreach, education and organizing. Our Affordable Housing Initiative promotes the expansion and preservation of affordable housing in the District. Every day I work with tenants who are searching for affordable housing and tenant associations striving to protect their existing affordable housing.

I am before you today to ask you to ensure that your recommendations to the Mayor make clear that the preservation and creation of *truly* affordable housing in the District is absolutely crucial *today* – not tomorrow, not in a ten-year plan, not as a side effect from long-term job training programs – but needed now to ensure that *all of* this city’s residents are surviving and thriving. Not just the new young professionals flooding the city, but the seniors and families who have lived in DC their whole lives and don’t want to be pushed out because they can’t find housing. Not just the high-wage earners who can afford new construction luxury rentals or condos, but the veterans and people with disabilities and families who are sleeping at bus stops, emergency rooms, and our city’s overburdened homeless shelters. Not just our wonderful teachers and firemen – but also those folks who are truly unable to find housing in this city that matches their level of income. *All of* these people are equally citizens of the District of Columbia and *all of* their needs need to be addressed by the Comprehensive Housing Strategy Task Force if you are truly going to make any difference in the policies of our city.

What do I mean by “truly” affordable housing? I mean that this Task Force needs to make a conscious distinction between its efforts to create actual, meaningful affordable housing in D.C. from the term of art that is based on a highly-inflated Area Median Income (AMI). As you surely know, our AMI includes the incomes of wealthy surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia, causing it to be markedly higher than if it solely reflected the incomes of DC residents. This skewed data means that when our city is only working to create housing that’s touted as affordable because it is, for example, designed for people at 80% AMI, this means that it is only affordable to a family of four making around \$85,000/year. But if the 80% standard was set using D.C.-only incomes, it drops by more than 30% for that same family of four to

roughly \$56,300/year. So please, do not get lured into the data that would suggest that the creation of affordable housing using the federally-created AMI standard is truly affordable in this city. The Legal Clinic agrees with other groups like the Coalition for Smarter Growth that this Task Force and the District generally should define affordability based on the earnings of typical D.C. families, not the broader region.

Beyond that issue, we at the Legal Clinic are most concerned with the complete lack of focus on the creation of housing at or below 30% of AMI. Every day I work with people who are indeed part of D.C.'s workforce, but make nowhere near 80% AMI, let alone 60, 50, or even 30%. The comprehensive housing strategy must address those D.C. residents who are low- and extremely low income, as the City has lost housing that is affordable for families who have incomes below 30% of AMI, or around \$31,050 for a family of four, at a more rapid rate than any other sector. For more details about this data, please read the excellent analysis done by D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute in their 2012 report "Disappearing Act."

Many of these families, therefore, can't find housing in DC *at all*. And, those who do have housing, carry a severe rent burden – meaning that more than half of their income go to paying for housing – and do not have that money available for the other basic necessities of life. In fact, in 2010, around two-thirds of D.C. households with incomes below 30% AMI paid more than half of their income on housing. This is unacceptable and we can do better. It should not be the position of this Task Force that creation of "workforce" housing between 80% and 100% of our inflated Area Median Income is the same thing as addressing the affordable housing needs of the thousands of DC residents making less than \$30,000, especially when working full-time at D.C.'s minimum wage only brings in around \$17,160 a year (based on an 8 hour day and a 260-day work year). Where can these families afford to live in D.C?

I also asked that you consider solutions for "today" and not just for the future. What did I mean? Well, the Legal Clinic's clients have an immediate need for more affordable housing so that they can leave shelters, rise out of poverty, continue raising their children and going to work and school – to live the lives that we all should have the opportunity to live. Unfortunately, however, we have not heard the Mayor articulate an immediate solution to help families who are struggling today. In fact, when you go to the Mayor's website, his five priorities fail to include housing, despite the fact that it was the most-heard concern at the One City Summit earlier this year. Rather, we are hearing a great deal about job creation and training as the catalyst for solving our housing crisis in the District.

While job training is an essential part of a long-term strategy, it completely fails to address the current, immediate housing crisis. When my clients hear the Mayor and his representatives say that city initiatives like "One City, One Hire" are "just as important as creating units" they reasonably feel like this administration is not concerned with their day-to-day well-being, as they are unable to find housing in this city for their families. One of my clients, who you might also hear from tonight, has said that it's backward thinking – as she already has all the tools in her tool belt to find a good job. The problem is that she can't get to a job or keep a job because she doesn't have a safe roof over her head for her and her children. When my clients are forced to hop from couch to couch, staying doubled up with friends; forced to stay in communal shelters that make them sick; forced to pay so much rent that they can't also

afford child care – it is folly to think that the primary solution for them is just job training. No, it's housing, housing, housing. Therefore, I ask this Task Force to not simply focus on job creation and wage improvement as a solution to housing, but to focus on how it can help add to the stock of affordable housing in D.C. now - in 2012 and 2013.

Finally, as you craft your recommendations to the Mayor, I ask you to stop and ask yourself again who are the citizens that this Task Force needs to keep in mind when proposing a truly “comprehensive strategy”? People with incomes at or below 50% of AMI are part of D.C. People earning D.C.'s minimum wage are part of the workforce and are part of D.C. People with disabilities that render them unable to work are part of D.C. People who are homeless or are looking for jobs, but haven't found one yet, are part of D.C. These are the people with severe rent burdens. These are the people without any stable housing. These are my clients and they are also the Mayor's constituents. Think of them, too, as you craft your comprehensive policies.

Tonight you will also be hearing more detail from one of my colleagues, as well as from some of our clients, regarding specific programs and policies that we believe will help preserve and add to truly affordable housing in the District. These include the Housing Production Trust Fund to fuel tenant purchase, the Local Rent Supplement Program to assist those residents making less than 30% AMI, Permanent Supportive Housing, Rent Control reform, and use of public lands and inclusionary zoning. I ask that you focus on how to strengthen and expand these programs in your recommendations.

Thank you for listening tonight and thank you in advance for putting forth strong recommendations to improve and expand affordable housing in the District of Columbia.