

**Testimony before the Committee on Economic Development
Performance Oversight Hearing for D.C. Housing Authority
Friday, March 1, 2013, 10 a.m.
By Misty C. Thomas
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Good morning and thank you Chairwoman Bowser and the members of this committee. 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 Legal Clinic has advocated for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the District of Columbia, through a unique combination of direct representation, impact litigation, policy and budget advocacy, and community outreach. Our Affordable Housing Initiative promotes the expansion and preservation of affordable housing in the District and works with tenants and tenant associations striving to protect their existing housing.

First of all, I want to thank DCHA's Executive Director and leadership for their ongoing willingness to engage and work with the advocacy community. We members of D.C. legal services community enjoy robust and regular communication with DCHA's high level staff on a variety of policy issues. We know that this collaboration is often time-intensive, but we strongly believe that it is meaningful and helps us achieve better policies that benefit our clients who participate in DCHA's housing programs.

Today I'd also like to briefly raise three DCHA issues that are of importance to our clients. One is the status of the appointment of a Housing Choice Voucher Program participant to the Board of Commissioners. Per Section 6-211 of the D.C. Code, the DCHA Board of Commissioners must include at least one member who is a current voucher recipient. With assistance from DCHA staff and the Participant Advisory Council, this Board member is to be nominated by the Mayor, with the advice and consent of this Council by resolution. Unfortunately, this position has not been filled for several years, meaning an important first-hand perspective is missing from the governing body that makes decisions every month that greatly affect the rights and experiences of D.C. voucher participants. Many of our clients are voucher holders and they want to feel like they have a voice on the Housing Authority's Board. This gap needs to be remedied quickly and we ask that DCHA prioritize providing possible candidates for nomination to the Mayor's office in the coming few weeks and for the Council to take appropriate action once they receive the nomination.

Additionally, the Agency may already be planning on discussing this in its testimony, but we want to make sure everyone knows that the Housing Authority will be closing its Waiting List to new applications on April 12, 2013. We at the Legal Clinic – as well as many other members of the advocacy community – opposed this closure, as we believe the importance of the waiting list

as a choice for those who do not currently have stable or affordable housing as well as the value of the list as a metric of the housing need in the District outweighs any possible administrative savings DCHA will gain from closing. However, the decision has now been made and we now want ensure that all Councilmembers, their staffs, and all residents of the District of Columbia know about this important change so they can spread the word prior to the deadline.

Practically speaking, this announcement means that the Housing Authority will no longer be accepting *new* applications for people seeking Public Housing or a Housing Choice Voucher (commonly known as Section 8). However, any person or family who has already applied – or who applies before the April 12, 2013 deadline – will remain on the Waiting List and be considered for placement when their application gets to the top of the list. Unfortunately, however, the Waiting List currently includes almost 70,000 families and individuals seeking housing assistance. So a new family who joins the list in 2013 is unlikely to reach the top of the Waiting List for any of the programs for many, many years, as names are pulled off the list based on the initial date of application as well as particular statuses or preference categories.

Nevertheless, this announcement is still very important and we hope Councilmembers and their staffs will help spread the word to anyone who is not currently on the D.C. Housing Authority Waiting List, but who would like to be added to the list before the April 12 deadline or anyone who thinks they applied before, but aren't sure if they are actually on the List or if the Housing Authority has their most current contact information. Once the April 12 deadline passes, we do not know how long it will be until DCHA reopens the Waiting List so we encourage people to apply now if they believe such housing assistance would be helpful and appropriate for them or their family. They can do so in person at the Housing Authority's office, online, or at one of several new satellite centers set up around town.

Finally, we are concerned that DCHA has still not briefed and leased up all of the families who are supposed to receive the 250 Local Rent Supplement Vouchers that were funded by the Council last May as part of the FY 2013 Budget Support Act to help transition families out of the D.C. homeless shelter system and into permanent housing. As of the end of 2012, DCHA reported to the advocacy community having only received 98 referrals from the Department of Human Services– which is tasked with identifying and referring the qualified families to DCHA. Of that 98, only about half of those families had completed briefing and received their vouchers at the end of 2012. I'm confident that more have been completed since then, but nevertheless, this pace is too slow. Additionally, we have had clients report that delays in inspections have led to them losing units to other renters—leaving them stuck in D.C. General or hotels. It is unclear to us exactly where the delays originate – although there appears to be an initial DHS delay in getting qualified referrals to DCHA, despite having received applications for well over the 250 spots. Nevertheless, it is incredibly important that this process move at a more aggressive pace.

We ask that DCHA work with DHS to figure out how they can better collaborate in getting families identified and processed as soon as possible so that they can get out of the shelter system and into the stable, affordable housing that will allow them to thrive in this city. Thank you again to DCHA for being a collaborative and client-centered city agency and thank you for this opportunity to testify.