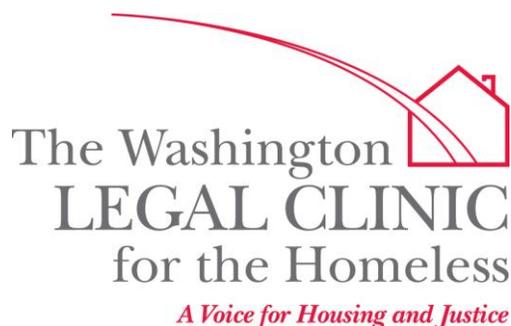


True Reformer Building
1200 U Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 328-5500
www.legalclinic.org



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**Testimony before the DC Council
Committee on Human Services
Roundtable on Homeless Families
Presented by Marta Beresin
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless
February 3, 2014**

Good Morning Councilmember Graham and members of the Committee. My name is Marta Beresin and I am a Staff Attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Thank you for holding this Roundtable to discuss the current crisis of family homelessness in DC. I have worked at the Legal Clinic directly with homeless families for 14 years. 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. My testimony will address the current challenges facing DHS with regard to homeless families as well as how we can change course to stop the trend of increasing family homelessness in DC.

We have a crisis in family homelessness to a great extent for one reason: because we have failed as a city to adequately preserve and produce affordable housing; instead we have allowed neighborhood gentrification to occur with little regard to who was displaced or how many affordable units were lost. From 2000-2010, DC lost half of its affordable units. In the midst of this crisis, DC's Mayor appointed Comprehensive Housing Strategy Taskforce in 2006 came up with a detailed plan for DC to "act immediately" to preserve 30,000 existing affordable units and produce 69,600 affordable units by 2020, including 14,600 for extremely low income renter households via creation of a local rent supplement program. DC did create the LRSP in 2007 and funded units according to the plan that first year (1,181), but since then we've fallen far behind. To date we've funded only 2,343 vouchers instead of the 8,000 we should have created by now under the plan.

As a result of these losses, not only are families becoming homeless at higher rates, but they are staying homeless for longer, creating a logjam in the shelter system and causing the numbers we're seeing today at DC General, in motels and now in recreation centers. Family homelessness increased 73% from 2008, when the Great Recession began, to 2012. It will continue to rise in coming years unless the DC government focuses more on preservation and increases production levels so that we are producing affordable units at a faster rate than we're losing them.



In addition to the lack of affordable housing, other factors may play a part in DC's immediate crisis. DC should study the effect that three recent and significant policy changes are having on the rate at which families are becoming homeless and their ability to reconnect quickly with housing.

First, what effect is closing the front door to shelter 7 months of the year having on shelter application rates during the winter? Beginning in the spring of 2011, the city withdrew a long-standing commitment it had made to ensure that no family with a minor child was forced to stay on the street or in an unsafe place no matter the time of year. Due to budget constraints, DHS defaulted to the letter of the law, admitting priority one families to shelter only when the weather forecast was for below freezing temperatures. As a result of the pent up demand from spring, summer and fall, each November we are seeing higher and higher numbers of priority one families coming into the Resource Center, and they may be coming in with higher needs due to weeks or months of staying in unsafe, unhealthy, unstable settings. How is this effecting DHS' ability to assist these families? Are they taking longer to exit shelter and thereby contributing to the logjam and current high numbers?

Second, what effect is focusing an increasing amount of our resources on short-term rental subsidies having on family homelessness rates and length of stay in shelter? We know that some families are cycling back into homelessness after stints in short-term housing assistance programs. In addition, some families and landlords have been reluctant to enter into lease agreements when there is only a guarantee of four months of assistance under the Rapid Rehousing Program. DHS' rate of transitioning families from shelter to housing, while starting to improve, is not as high as they had hoped this winter—contributing to a back-door exit problem that clearly is contributing to the higher number of families in shelter this winter.

Third, what effect has implementation of TANF time limits and flat benefit levels amidst rising housing costs had on family homelessness? The first time limit cut went into effect in April 2011 and the second in October 2013. The third is set to hit October 1st 2014. The purchasing power of the average TANF benefit has decreased nearly one-third since 1996. DC's TANF and SNAP benefits today bring families to just 58.6 percent of the federal poverty line.¹ In addition, many TANF recipients struggle to afford housing as most do not receive any housing assistance. 6,000 families who receive TANF are currently homeless or doubled up with other families, according to DHS. In 2013, benefits covered only 30.3 percent of the rent of a fair market two bedroom apartment.² As a result of TANF time limit cuts and flat benefit levels, more and more low-income families who rely on TANF during bouts of unemployment may be forced into shelter because they cannot survive otherwise, even doubled-up with other families.

If you believe, as I do, that homelessness is not caused by bad personal choices, flawed

¹ *TANF Cash Benefits Continued to Lose Value in 2013* by Ife Floyd and Liz Schott, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. March 2013. www.cbpp.org/files/3-28-13tanf.pdf

² *The Value of TANF Cash Benefits Continued to Erode in 2012* by Ife Finch and Liz Schott, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. March 2013. www.cbpp.org/files/3-28-13tanf.pdf

character, or a “culture of dependency”, but by poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and suppressed wages, then the DC government must reverse these policies if we want to reverse the tragedy that increasing family homelessness and poverty visit upon a third of DC’s children.

Immediate Crisis Recommendations:

1) DC needs to bring all of its cross agency resources to bear to find an alternative to sheltering families communally in recreation centers.

The HSRA requires that families be sheltered in apartment-style shelter units or in private rooms when no apartment-style units are available. The law requires this for the safety, health, and stability of homeless children. Most families have left the recreation centers after staying one or two nights there. This means that while they felt unsafe staying in their cars, at Union Station, with abusers, or in a hospital Emergency Rooms, they felt less safe sharing space with strangers in a DC recreation center and therefore returned to unsafe places they had previously fled. Some alternatives DC should explore immediately are the Spring Road building in Ward 4, other vacant DC-owned properties, vacant public housing units, or expanding to an additional floor at DC General if available.

2) WLCH fully supports the plan that was devised by a working group of the Strategic Planning Committee of the Interagency Council on Homelessness to increase the speed with which families move into RRH units and fully resource the program.

In addition to the suggestions outlined by the working group, DHS should work with DHCD, DCHA and other DC agencies that work with landlords to immediately reach out to all such landlords for available units for RRH.¹

3) DHS should be provided with adequate resources to address the current crisis without cutting other critical services such as services for singles during and outside of hypothermia season and TANF job preparation.

FY 2015 Recommendations to address the crisis:

1) In order to renew its commitment to a comprehensive affordable housing strategy, DC should invest in 1,000 new LRSP vouchers in FY 2015, some of which should be used for Permanent Supportive Housing for families.

We commend the Mayor for his recent investments in the Housing Production Trust Fund and support DC’s emphasis on building new affordable units. But production takes time, and vouchers will create affordable units immediately to begin to address the crisis facing our families.

2) DC should return to its policy of ensuring priority one families have access to emergency shelter, ERAP, Rapid Rehousing, and other emergency solutions year-round.

It is both a moral imperative and wise fiscal choice for the city to ensure that no matter what time of year it is, no child sleeps in an unsafe place. Serving priority one families

when their needs arise increases the chances that the government can quickly reconnect them to stable housing before long-term homelessness leaves them with greater obstacles. Studies show that the longer a person is homeless, the harder it is for them to become stably housed. Being homeless without access to appropriate services affects ones connections to supports such as child care, as well as ones health, ability to regain and maintain employment, child development, and progress in school. A year round flow will enable DC to ensure a higher level of case management services to families at a lower cost.

3) Finally, DC should increase TANF benefits to bring them in line with Maryland's benefit level and enable families who rely on them intermittently to maintain their housing.

Conclusion:

DC cannot simply continue business as usual or we will continue to dig ourselves into a deeper and deeper family homelessness hole. We look forward to working with the Council and the Administration to resolve this crisis and firmly believe that with the right policy choices and investments we can resolve the current crisis as well as find ourselves in a different position come next winter.

ⁱ WLCH has other suggestions for improving the RRH Program, which are more long-term in nature, including: a) increasing the length of the RRH program and the intensity of services for higher need families, such as families headed by very young parents; b) improving the assessment process for RRH by adding an economic component to more appropriately identify families for the right type of housing assistance; and c) following families after they leave the program in order to compile accurate performance outcome measurements.