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Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Economic Development
Oversight Hearing on D.C. Housing Authority
Presented by Misty Thomas
Attorney, Affordable Housing Initiative,
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless
February 19, 2014

Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Misty Thomas and I am an attorney with the Affordable Housing Initiative at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. 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.

Unfortunately, the reality faced by many D.C. residents is a far cry from that vision – particularly amidst the growing housing and homelessness crisis in our city. While no District agency can solve these problems alone, the Housing Authority plays an important role in stabilizing families and ensuring that there is affordable housing through the provision of Housing Choice vouchers, public housing, and other crucial housing subsidy programs. Although most of its programs are federally funded, the Housing Authority also administers D.C.'s vital Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP). DCHA does an excellent job in making sure that program succeeds, ensuring that hundreds of local families are in stable affordable housing and contributing to their rent through their own income, rather than in our already overburdened and expensive shelter system. We hope the Council continues to support this program – which fills a critical gap in D.C., especially when federal funding has been decreased due to the sequester and other unfortunate cuts to the national housing budget. DCHA effectively manages this program and we hope they have more resources to devote to it this coming year.

I'd also like to briefly raise two other issues that are of importance to our clients. My colleague Will Merrifield will also be testifying later today about our major concerns regarding the New Communities Initiative, the joint development effort of DCHA and the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development. But I would like to discuss the 2013 waiting list closure and the vacant seat on the Board of Commissioners.



As you recall, the DCHA waiting list closed last year to new applications. To their credit, the Housing Authority made many efforts to ensure that the closure happened without major confusion or chaos. But that closure, while helpful to the Housing Authority's administration, does not actually slow or diminish the staggering affordable housing need in D.C. When it closed in 2013, there were close to 70,000 households on that waiting list. I am not sure about the current number of families still waiting, but I'm sure Director Todman will speak to that later today.

Because there are so many families in D.C. still waiting for housing assistance, and even more who have lost their stable housing since the closure and aren't reflected on the frozen waiting list – it is crucial that this Council monitor how quickly DCHA is able to move through the list, how many families are being housed in Public Housing or with vouchers each year, and what the projections are for future years. Tracking this data about the Housing Authority's ability to house new families should be used to inform other parts of the District's affordable housing policy because it cannot and should not fall on any one agency, be it DCHA or Department of Human Services, to solve the housing and homelessness crises in this city. It is incumbent upon this Council and the Mayor to look at all the important data – including the Housing Authority waiting list progress and New Communities replacement unit production – and use that information to strategize about how we can actually address the shrinking availability of affordable housing in D.C. and provide better options so that our most-vulnerable neighbors and our lowest-income workers can actually build stability and improve their situations.

One additional concern that I've been raising for several years now – including at last year's oversight hearing - is that there is still no Housing Choice Voucher Program participant on DCHA's Board of Commissioners. It is unacceptable that the seat has remained empty for so long. 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 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 weeks and for the Council to take appropriate action once they receive the nomination. It is disappointing that we have to ask for this yet again.

Finally, I do want to thank DCHA's leadership for their ongoing willingness to engage and work with the advocacy community. 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.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.