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for the Homeless

A Voice for Housing and Justice

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Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services
Roundtable on Family Shelter
Presented by Patricia Mullahy Fugere
March 28, 2014

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.

Going back as far as 1988, public policy of the District of Columbia has recognized how vitally important it is to the recovery and rebounding of families who are homeless that families have private space where they can do all of the things that all of us who have homes do in private: bathe our children, prepare and eat family meals, supervise homework, say bed time prayers with our sons and daughters...and perhaps most importantly lock the door behind us at night, keeping strangers at bay, confident that we are doing all we can to protect our families.

How have we gotten to the point that the very system that exists to provide a safety net for those who are most vulnerable instead has become a system that places them in greater harm's way? Can it be that disdain or distrust or disbelief in families runs so deep that we as a community are not troubled that the norm for children in deepest poverty is to live life so publicly that there are opportunities at every turn for strangers – and potentially predators – to touch their fragile young lives?

We owe it to the more than 1300 children who were sleeping in DC emergency shelters last night (and the countless others who can't even get in to shelter) to do better than this. Here are some thoughts on how we can.

- 1.) Families should be in housing. The District has sufficient resources to expand affordable housing opportunities for its lowest income residents, and we urge the Mayor and Council to do so. Of late, you hear people use the expression "housing is health care," since health outcomes are so much better when people have the stability that a home affords. Housing is also child welfare. Outcomes for our children will be better when parents no longer have the stress of living pillar to post, scrambling every day for a safe place to stay.

- 2.) If a family experiences a housing crisis, they should be able to access shelter year-round, no matter what the temperature is. When a family loses housing in April and can't get into shelter until November, the challenges that they face will surely mount as trauma for the children deepens. Staying in unstable and unsafe situations (Laundromats, the train station, riding the bus, sleeping in a car, staying with virtual strangers) makes families vulnerable. Families are forced to weigh the relative dangers and take chances they should never have to take. Should they stay with the kind stranger they met on the bus? Is sleeping in the car better or worse than camping out on their cousin's floor, when they've always had an uneasy feeling about the cousin's boyfriend because he's been overly friendly to the children? Should they succumb to the advances of that fellow from church, if it will give the children a safe place to stay for a little while?
- 3.) The District should re-commit to apartment style shelter. Having private space will minimize the opportunity for strangers to jeopardize the well-being of our most precious resource, our children.
- 4.) Shelter should be 24 hour, not just overnight, and once in, families should be permitted to stay in until they have an appropriate affordable alternative. The administration's recent move to place families in severe weather shelter only, allowing them access only on hypothermic nights, forcing them out in the morning, and demanding that they reapply day after day after day, heightens the stress and chaos in those families' lives, and ultimately makes them more vulnerable.
- 5.) There should be a more supportive, rather than punitive, approach to assessing and meeting families' needs. We've met families who are scared to share some of the challenges they face, fearing that if they confess a specific need or vulnerability, they might lose their children, or get kicked out of shelter or not get services and supports. Families should be able to have confidence that the public shelter system exists to help them through their difficult times, rather than make their times more difficult. Right now, too many families feel that a trip to the Family Resource Center is one that will provide little help.
- 6.) Efforts to divert families from entering the shelter system must be mindful not to place families in greater harm's way. We've expressed this concern when we've voiced our opposition to a provisional placement scheme that doesn't provide adequate protections. When intake workers try to find alternative placements for families, compelling them to stay with acquaintances or distant relatives who are virtual strangers or who raise some red flag should not be fair game.

Every few years, in the midst of a crisis, we examine our shelter system, acknowledge the problems, and commit to doing better. I hope that we really mean it this time.

