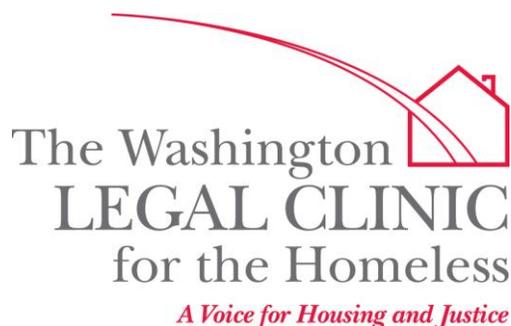


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**Testimony before the Committee on Economic Development
DHS Oversight Hearing
February 26, 2014
By Will Merrifield
Staff Attorney, Affordable Housing Initiative
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless**

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Will Merrifield and I am a Staff 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. Councilmember Graham, as you have heard today, we are in an affordable housing crisis. Currently, in the District, a person making minimum wage must work approximately 132 hours per week, 52 weeks a year, or earn \$27 an hour at 40 hours per week to afford a 2 bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent, which is \$1,412 per month.¹ The reality of this housing market is that if you are a senior citizen on a fixed income, a person with a disability, or a minimum wage worker, you cannot live in DC without some sort of housing subsidy. In other words, there needs to be a way to fill the gap for these individuals between what is reasonable to spend on housing and the market rate.

The most effective way to fill this gap is through long term subsidies. Unfortunately, the District's subsidized housing waitlist is currently closed and numbers approximately 70,000 households. The consequence of the lack of long term subsidized housing is the explosion in family homelessness that we are dealing with today.

I want to highlight that although the Department of Human Services can play a role in alleviating the family homelessness crisis, it is not the cause of the crisis. Furthermore, DHS is not equipped to solve the crisis. We are in this situation due to years of failed housing policy on both a local and national level. For too long, the District has made neither the production of new affordable housing nor the preservation of existing affordable housing a priority. On a funding level, the District has routinely pitted programs such as Rapid Rehousing, Local Rent Supplement, and Housing Production Trust Fund against each other. On a policy level, the District has gutted rent control through the use of Hardship Petitions and Voluntary Agreements, failed to produce deeply affordable units through its Inclusionary Zoning program, and has essentially given away billions of dollars' worth of valuable public land without getting appropriate levels of affordable housing in return.²

¹ National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2012: America's Forgotten Housing Crisis* 41 (March 2013).

² WAMU, *Deals for Developers*. March 20, 2013. Available at <http://apps.npr.org/deals-for-developers-wamu/>



Meanwhile, in the midst of all this, DC's flagship affordable housing program, the New Communities Initiative, will not add one net new unit of hard stock affordable housing. Instead, it only seeks to replace demolished public housing units. Even more disturbing with respect to New Communities is that the program has not come remotely close to its stated goal of one-for-one replacement of already demolished or soon to be demolished public housing units. All of these factors, together, lead to the loss of thousands of affordable housing units per year with no real plan to replace—let alone add— any affordable housing stock.

The solution to this crisis is not for District leaders to enact regressive policies to deal with homelessness. Any such plan would only serve to cynically scapegoat the victims of the District's own failed policies. Instead, DC should make affordable housing the number one priority in all future development, invest in programs that purposely and efficiently produce deeply affordable hard stock units, and strengthen current programs meant to preserve existing affordable units. If we fail to do these things and continue on the same path, we will be at this exact hearing next year debating the family homelessness crisis once again. The only difference is that it will look even worse than it does now.

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