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The Washington  
**LEGAL CLINIC**  
for the Homeless

*A Voice for Housing and Justice*

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**Testimony before the DC Council  
Committee of the Whole  
Hearing on FY 2015 Budget Request Act and FY 2014 Budget Support Act  
Presented by Nassim Moshiree  
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless  
May 9, 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.

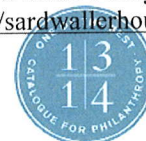
It's everyone's job to end homelessness, not just because housing is a critical human right and not just because a high level of homelessness indicates a community with faulty priorities. It must be everyone's job because homelessness affects every facet of a person's life and everyone in our community, whether we are presently housed or without a home. For children, it can determine their future. We want to thank you for your commitment to tackle homelessness this year as a Council-wide and District-wide problem. Here's why that approach is so fundamental:

### **1. Housing = Jobs**

Many people believe that the key to ending homelessness is increasing the income of homeless households. But we believe that the key to ending joblessness is increasing access to affordable housing. Increasing the minimum wage was a great start, but it would have to be raised to \$28/hour for a mother with two children to afford a two bedroom apartment in DC.<sup>1</sup> It is incredibly difficult to get or keep a job when you don't have a stable home, particularly when you cannot store belongings in shelter and are forced to reapply for shelter every day, as both families and individuals experienced this winter. In addition: "A growing body of research suggests that providing housing assistance to low-income families... may help [them] get and keep jobs."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the District, a worker earning the Minimum Wage (\$8.25 per hour) must work approximately 137 hours per week, 52 weeks a year, or earn \$28/hour at 40 hours a week, to afford a 2-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent, which is \$1,469 per month. Working 137 hours a week leaves the worker only 4.5 hours per day to get back and forth to work, to sleep, to eat, and to care for children—not to mention the impossibility of securing daycare for 19.5 hours per day.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Sard and Margy Waller, "Housing Strategies to Strengthen Welfare Policy and Support Working Families." (<http://www.brookings.edu/es/urban/publications/sardwallerhousingwelfare.pdf>)



## **2. Housing = Economic Development and Revenue**

The creation of affordable housing stimulates the economy. Rental subsidies decrease vacancy rates, and housing production creates construction and other jobs—opportunities that will hopefully be available to currently jobless DC residents. With increased job opportunities and wages comes increased tax revenues.

## **3. Housing = Health**

Homelessness has a significant negative impact on health as well. In shelters and on the street, people experience countless barriers to maintaining good physical and mental health --- from lacking proper nutrition, to having their medication stolen, to contracting illnesses in shelter because of the close quarters and an inability to control one's environment. In DC, where our HIV infection rate is officially characterized as an epidemic, people with HIV/AIDS are hit particularly hard by homelessness. Studies show that mortality rates decrease by 80% when people with AIDS are provided housing.<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that the United States ranks first in health care spending but 25<sup>th</sup> in spending on social services. A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that people who are homeless “are disproportionately represented among the highest users of costly hospital-based acute care.” and that placing people who are homeless in affordable housing “can lead to improved health, reduced hospital use, and decreased health care costs.”<sup>4</sup>

For children in particular, housing is often the most critical health intervention. According to Children's HealthWatch: “A safe, decent, affordable home is like a vaccine — it literally keeps children healthy.”<sup>5</sup>

## **4. Housing = Safety**

Housing is also a surprisingly effective public safety intervention. As we have recently and horrifically witnessed with Relisha Rudd's disappearance, people experiencing homelessness are more vulnerable to abuse and victimization than those in housing. With nearly a third of homeless families having a history of domestic violence, but with very few of those families located in secure confidential shelters, housing can be the difference between escaping domestic violence and continuing to suffer from it.

Secure housing placements also reduce recidivism for ex-offenders and make it far easier for parole officers and supportive services providers to monitor and track the activities of

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<sup>3</sup> Wolitski, R., Kidder, D. & Fendton, F. (2007). The effects of housing status on health-related outcomes in people living with HIV: A systematic review of the literature. *AIDS & Behavior*, 11(6) / Supp 2: S167-171.

<sup>4</sup> Housing as Healthcare – New York's Boundary Crossing Experiment,” *N Engl J Med* 369;25, December 19, 2013

<sup>5</sup>

[http://www.rollcall.com/issues/57\\_75/raphael\\_bostic\\_risa\\_lavizzo\\_mourey\\_housing\\_health\\_care\\_go\\_hand-211053-1.html?pos=oopih](http://www.rollcall.com/issues/57_75/raphael_bostic_risa_lavizzo_mourey_housing_health_care_go_hand-211053-1.html?pos=oopih), [http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/news/ms\\_edenhousing\\_oct2013/](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/news/ms_edenhousing_oct2013/).

those on parole. The greater the housing stability of ex-offenders, the lower the risk of reoffending. The fewer community supports such as housing and employment, the more likely the person will reoffend. Even the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence issued a policy statement opposing housing restrictions for convicted sex offenders due to their concern that the lack of stable housing increases the chances of further offenses.<sup>6</sup>

### **5. Housing = Education**

The absence of stable housing has an enormous impact on educational outcomes. There are 4043 homeless children in DC public and charter schools this year, reflecting a 60% increase in the last five years.<sup>7</sup>

When families cannot even access shelter for half of the year, let alone housing, it becomes a Herculean feat for parents to ensure that their children get to school each day, that they get enough sleep, and that they have adequate food and nutrition to be able to concentrate on their studies. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that family economic hardship is a primary predictor for poor health and academic performance.<sup>8</sup> In fact, poverty has actually been shown to change brain development in children, resulting in significant cognitive and behavioral problems.<sup>9</sup> Housing stability has been shown to be key not only to keeping children in school, but to ensuring they succeed and do not struggle with homelessness and poverty as adults.

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<sup>6</sup> (<http://www.naesv.org/Polycypapers/communitymanagementofconvictedoffenders.html>). When Dr. Jill Levenson, a national expert on the connection between housing and recidivism and professor at Lynn University, presented at a National Alliance to End Homelessness conference, she quoted some of the following studies:

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/general/detail/2125>,  
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2033>

- “In Georgia, residential instability was found to be a robust predictor of reoffending; the likelihood of re-arrest increased by 25% each time a parolee moved (Meredith, Speir, Johnson, & Hull, 2003).
- Released prisoners living in temporary shelters in New York were more likely to use drugs and alcohol, to be unemployed, and to abscond from probation or parole (Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999).
- An unstable living arrangement was the strongest predictor ( $r = .29$ ) of parole absconding in a sample of over 4,000 parolees in California (Williams, McShane, & Dolny, 2000). National sample ( $n = 2,030$ ): Probationers who moved more than once during probation were almost twice as likely to have had a disciplinary hearing (Schulenberg, 2007).”

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[http://wamu.org/news/14/03/18/dc\\_by\\_the\\_numbers\\_many\\_students\\_are\\_well\\_schooled\\_on\\_being\\_homeless](http://wamu.org/news/14/03/18/dc_by_the_numbers_many_students_are_well_schooled_on_being_homeless)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_1073.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1073.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See generally, [How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character](#), Paul Tough (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012).

## **6. Housing = Child welfare**

And finally, many of the Legal Clinic's clients who are homeless are often forced to separate from their children, placing them temporarily with different family members or friends so that they may have a safe place to sleep. It is estimated that 30% of children in foster care in the U.S. could be reunited with their families if their families had adequate housing.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, homelessness affects all of us and every aspect of the life of a person who lacks safe housing. The time to make meaningful investments in affordable housing programs that can help end homelessness is now. Now is also the time to ensure year-round access to emergency shelter for all DC residents who need it, because allowing DC residents, including children, to remain on the streets and in other unsafe places will cost us much more in the long-run than investing in affordable housing today.

The Legal Clinic urges you to fund and support the budget and policy recommendations of the Fair Budget Coalition, The Way Home Campaign to end chronic homelessness by 2017, and the Helping Families Home Roadmap. In particular, we recommend adequate funding for Local Rent Supplement Program tenant vouchers, Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Rehousing for singles, delay of the October 1 TANF cut and increases in benefit levels, and additional funding for Interim Disability Assistance. Our specific budget recommendations are contained in my written testimony. Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.

### **Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) tenant vouchers:**

\$10 million, which would serve approximately 667 families, \$1.73 million of which should be directed to serve families referred from DHS.

### **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):**

\$5.4 million to house chronically homeless families and individuals. (\$2.9 million to house 77 chronically homeless families, and \$2.46 mill to house 100 individuals)

### **Homeless Singles Population:**

\$250K to create a coordinated entry system for singles and assess 1300 homeless individuals

\$1.5 million to Rapid-Rehousing Program for singles

### **Interim Disability Assistance (IDA):**

\$580K to provide application assistance to IDA recipients

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<sup>10</sup> Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing-Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing, *Child Welfare*, Vol. LXXXIII, #5 Sept/Oct 2004, p. 501. In 1995, the DC Child and Family Services Administration's Court Receiver estimated that between one-third and one-half of DC's foster children could be returned home immediately if their families just had adequate housing. Since then, DC has lost half of its affordable housing units, making it unlikely that this statistic has changed for the better in the last 19 years.

**Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF):**

\$10 million to increase TANF benefits by at least 15% plus a cost of living adjustment (COLA) in FY15.

**Homeless Youth Population:**

\$10 million to implement the “End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act of 2014” by expanding emergency and longer-term housing to 150 homeless youth/young families and establishing a coordinated system of care for youth.

**Dignity for Homeless Families Bill:**

Include the “Dignity for Homeless Families” bill in the BSA to ensure families can access private, safe, legal shelter next winter and will not have to reapply and prove eligibility on a daily basis. This recommendation should have zero fiscal impact given that it would represent a return to a policy and practice that has been in effect for over a decade.