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The Washington
LEGAL CLINIC
for the Homeless

A Voice for Housing and Justice

**Testimony before the DC Council
Committee on Human Services
Human Services Budget Oversight Hearing
Presented by Nassim Moshiree
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless
April 30, 2014**

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Good Morning Councilmember Graham and members of the Committee. 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. Thank you for holding this Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2015 Budget for the Department of Human Services (“DHS”). My testimony will focus on the need to invest in affordable housing to address the family homelessness crisis.

The stories behind how individual families in the District become homeless are many and varied, but at its core, our family homelessness crisis is an affordable housing crisis.¹ As such, it follows that the solution to this crisis largely relies on investments in affordable housing programs that will allow DC families to gain and retain stable housing.

To tackle this crisis, DC must 1) assess families’ housing needs honestly; 2) identify the housing programs that will most appropriately serve those needs for each family, and 3) ensure that these programs are funded at appropriate levels based on needs assessments and operated in a way that helps families regain long-term housing stability.

DC has three main housing programs that can help move families out of the shelter system immediately, and each is designed to meet a different level of need – The Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) mirrors the Federal Housing Choice Voucher Program, providing a rental subsidy to families for whom cost is the main barrier to housing; the Permanent Supportive Housing Program (PSH) provides housing and wrap-around services to chronically homeless families who need those additional supports to remain housed; and the Rapid-Rehousing Program (RRH) provides short-term housing subsidies and supportive services to families and is designed to serve those families who do not need longer-term subsidies, i.e. families who are working or are able to increase their income

¹ DC has lost half its stock of affordable housing in the last ten years, and there are over 70,000 people on the DC Housing Authority’s wait-list.



within a relatively short period of time to afford market rate rent on their own. All of these programs are significantly cheaper than shelter.²

From both a funding and policy perspective, the District has routinely pitted these programs against one other, contributing to longer shelter stays for families and resulting in the over-capacity and overburdened family system we have today. There's no way around it. Each of these programs must be adequately funded in order to successfully tackle family homelessness in DC.

Rapid-Rehousing is currently the favored tool being used to move families out of the shelter system. DHS is undertaking an effort to identify 500 units for families in 100 days in order to ensure sufficient capacity at DC General for the start of the next hypothermia season. Moving families quickly into safe housing is an effort we support, but we also have serious concerns about the lack of data, accountability, and transparency in a program upon which the District is relying as its primary housing tool for families that are homeless. We are also concerned about the use of public funds to incentivize landlords' participation in the program, especially given that DHS officials have publicly stated that they will provide assistance to landlords who need to evict RRH tenants, but have provided no detail as to what that assistance might be.

If our goal is to help DC families regain housing stability, and that *should* be our goal, then we must measure and track real performance outcomes to ensure the program is working. Currently, providers do not have the resources to track families once they have exited the program, and the only marker by which success is measured is through recidivism, or whether a family who has participated in the rapid-rehousing program returns to shelter. As a recent column by Petula Dvorak³ in the Washington Post highlighted, recidivism is not an accurate measure of whether a family has remained stably housed. Ms. Dvorak's column featured the story of a working mother who, a year and a half after getting a rapid-rehousing subsidy, is once again homeless and living doubled up with a friend, but has not returned to the shelter system and so she is counted as a success. While HUD may recommend that jurisdictions measure success in this manner, that does not make it a best practice and certainly the District can choose to measure success in a more meaningful and honest way that goes beyond the bare minimum established by HUD if we choose.

The Roadmap to an Improved Family Homelessness System has several recommendations that we support for strengthening our Rapid-Rehousing program, including the hiring of

² Family shelter costs approximately \$50,000 per year, RRH and PSH--\$30,000 per year, and LRSP--\$15,000 per year per family.

³ "Without Affordable rents, D.C.'s rehousing program can't rescue homeless families," by Petula Dvorak, The Washington Post, April 21, 2014.

additional staff at DHS, requiring training of providers, making sure there are proper protections for families through program regulations, collecting and tracking data across all providers that can be used to make improvements to the program in a timely manner, and investing in a longitudinal study of families in the program to look at how many achieve long-term stability after they have left the program.

But even with a strengthened Rapid-Rehousing Program, the reality for many DC families struggling with homelessness is that a short-term subsidy will not allow them enough time to increase their income at the level they would need to afford market rent in the District.⁴ Rapid-Rehousing is a useful tool to quickly move families out of shelter, but as the Post article highlighted, it is not an affordable housing tool; it does not create a single unit of affordable housing in a city that has already largely become unaffordable for a significant portion of its population. We must acknowledge that there are families working full-time jobs and providing necessary services on which the rest of us rely, who deserve to live in the same community in which they were born, were raised, and to which they now contribute. And we must acknowledge still that there are DC families who, due to chronic health issues, disabilities, or other significant challenges, cannot work and need both a long-term subsidy and supportive services in order to successfully remain housed.

Therefore, efforts to move families out of shelter quickly need to be coupled with appropriate investments in long-term, deeply affordable housing. Given the rise in the number of families seeking emergency shelter this winter, DC should ensure it is creating affordable housing now and in the future that meets families' needs. This should include:

Increased funding for the tenant-based side of the Local Rent Supplement Program, which makes up the difference between what a family renting housing in DC can afford to pay and market rent. We support the Fair Budget Coalition's recommendation of a \$10 million increase to LRSP, which would serve over 660 homeless families (including over 1320 children) with long-term affordable housing immediately, i.e., in FY 2015. We also recommend that the District direct a portion of this \$10 million (\$1.73 million) to DHS to assist families currently in our shelter system.

Increased funding for the Permanent Supportive Housing Program, which provides affordable housing to chronically homeless families who need additional supportive services in order to remain house. We recommend \$2.9 million in FY15 which would serve 77 new families.

Finally, we support all of the Fair Budget Coalition's recommendations for FY15. Thank you for your time.

⁴ 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