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The Washington
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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 B20-735: the "End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act of 2014"
Presented by Nassim Moshiree
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless
May 7, 2014**

Good Morning Councilmember Graham and members of the Committee. My name is Nassim Moshiree and I am a Staff Attorney 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.

I'm here today to testify in support of B20-735, the "End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act of 2014."

This winter, nearly **50% of families seeking shelter were headed by youth** under the age of 24. This is not such a shocking statistic once we take into account the fact that youth in our community are not afforded the necessary supports and resources they need to avoid long term homelessness. Most homeless youth have lost their housing due to one of the following circumstances: aging out of foster care, being kicked out of a parent's home due to mental health, pregnancy, sexual orientation, or substance abuse; or fleeing their home due to abuse, neglect, mental illness, or substance abuse on the part of the parent or caretaker.

At the Legal Clinic, we are often contacted by young mothers and fathers who struggle to find a safe place to sleep and have been turned away from every program designed to serve them due to lack of beds, space, funding, or all of the above. And while we do not as often come across unaccompanied minors without children, a mostly hidden population that rarely seeks mainstream services, we do occasionally meet very young men and women at our intake sites who are forced to stay in DC's low barrier shelters for adults – where they are surrounded by people much older than them, where they are offered little



in terms of stability, and where they have no access to services that would help them address the trauma that may have led to their homelessness, or that could help them reconnect with their families, stay in school, or develop the skills they need to enter the workforce.

Without adequate shelter, housing, and services specifically targeted to meet the needs of the youth population, the District will continue to see a rise in both family homelessness and chronic homelessness, which will end up costing our community much more in the long run.

Last winter, one of our attorneys was contacted by a 17 year old mother with one child who had been turned away from the family shelter intake site on the basis that she was a minor¹, and who had then started trading sex for a place to stay because she would otherwise be on the street.²

Another mother, 18, had dropped out of high school when she'd had a baby, but she tried her best to get back on track – re-registering for school and entering a job training program – unfortunately, she couldn't follow through with either because she had no where to sleep.

Many of the young moms and dads that we work with lack any community safety net, and many have not had the opportunity to develop the education or skills to acquire and maintain stable, long-term housing and employment on their own. Some have aged out of the DC foster care system, only to enter the homeless services system. Others are not even that lucky and can't access any shelter or housing programs. These young parents end up in far worse situations, like environments where they are susceptible to abuse and sexual trafficking.

For too many years, the District has been shortchanging our children and youth (for example, the Administration's refusal to acknowledge that youth have a right to shelter under the HSRA), and then facing the consequences when they grow into adults who don't have the skills necessary to achieve self-sufficiency through a living wage job and end up in our already inadequate family shelter system.

¹ The Department of Human Services has incorrectly interpreted the HSRA to conclude that youth are not entitled to shelter in freezing weather. See the attached Legal Clinic blog post from October 2013 which includes our analysis of why the District is obligated to provide shelter to unaccompanied youth under the HSRA.

² From February to May of 2013, one local youth service provider had to turn away at least 150 unaccompanied minors due to lack of emergency shelter space, many of whom also had children of their own.

By ensuring that youth have access to the services and supports they need when they first need it, DC will prevent them from needing even more intensive and expensive interventions down the road.

Our government must invest in our children if we are to prevent another generation of chronically homeless DC residents who will continue the cycle of poverty. There are significant institutional barriers leading to so many of our youth ending up in our adult shelter system, and underfunding for youth-based programs is chief among these. The time to tackle these issues is now.

In summary, please vote for and invest \$10 million in the End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act. If fully funded, the End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act would only take up 0.13% of DC's FY'15 Budget. It would save DC a total tax and social burden of \$50 million.