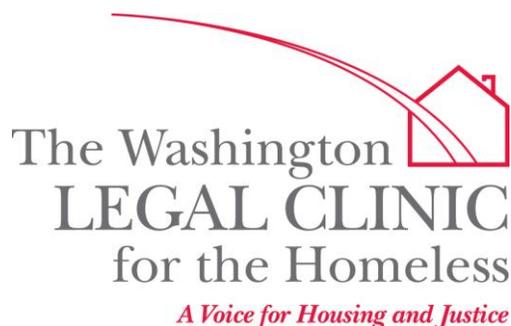


True Reformer Building
1200 U Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 328-5500
www.legalclinic.org



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Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services Human Services Budget Oversight Hearing

Presented by Marta Beresin
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

April 30, 2014

Good Morning Councilmember Graham and members of the Committee. My name is Marta Beresin and I am a Staff Attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, where I have worked directly with homeless families for the past 14 years. 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 budget for services for homeless families.

DC is at a crossroads regarding family homelessness policy in four significant ways: 1) Do we ensure access to homeless assistance year-round or only when a family might freeze to death?; 2) Do we shelter families communally in recreation centers or with dignity, privacy, and according to the law?; 3) Do we continue to rely on dilapidated, large-scale, institutional shelters or begin to shift towards small-scale, apartment-style shelter and housing programs?; 4) And finally, do we address the crisis of more and more families falling into homelessness by funding affordable housing (which my colleague Nassim will address) and other solutions at the appropriate levels or by hiding budget shortfalls, cutting programs that serve our most vulnerable residents, and reducing the rights of homeless families?

First, the Council should follow the budget recommendations in “Helping Families Home: A Roadmap for the District” in order to ensure DC is on a path to year-round access to assistance for homeless families: For at least ten years and until the spring of 2011, the DC government ensured year-round access to emergency shelter for any family with a minor child who was homeless and staying in an unsafe place. What this meant was that whether it was July or January, whether it was 31 degrees, 38 degrees or 70 degrees, if a family had no safe place to stay, they were placed in emergency shelter because the notion that children

would be left outside or in otherwise unsafe situations was unacceptable to our community. My friends and DC neighbors are shocked when I tell them that DC no longer ensures this basic safety net for vulnerable families, that no matter how long you've lived or worked or paid taxes in DC, there is NO safety net for you or your family if you lose your home, unless you happen to become homeless on a hypothermic night. The measure of a great city is how it cares for its most vulnerable residents. The DC government must recommit to protecting homeless children from harm year-round. The Roadmap establishes this as a goal and importantly, lays out a plan for the next 12 months that will ensure it can happen.

Second, the Council should pass the Dignity for Homeless Families Amendment Act: Not since the mid-'90s has DC policy been to shelter homeless families with minor children like our single adult population: in communal settings, only overnight, and only on freezing nights. In the nearly twenty years since that time, our community acknowledged the problems with that approach and embraced better solutions to protect homeless children and meet the needs of their families. But beginning in February, DHS changed this practice and began sheltering homeless families in rec centers and for only one night at a time. Soon thereafter, two DC Superior Court judges issued injunctions against the practice because of the irreparable harm to children it could cause and because it violated DC law that requires families to be sheltered in apartment-style units and, when there are none available, in "private rooms."

We thank you Councilmember Graham for spearheading legislation that will ensure that the intent of the Council is carried out: that private room means a private room. The legislation should also ensure that families are not forced to return to the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center to reapply for shelter each day—a major change in practice that accompanied the rec center usage this past winter and which I address further below.

Third, DHS should plan for new, small-scale, sufficient in numbers, legal and safe family shelters in DC: As has been noted in recent media accounts, DC General, the city's biggest family shelter where 1/3 of families currently sheltered reside, is rundown, dilapidated, and in some cases unsafe for families. But, as noted in the Roadmap, DC should not tear it down before first having a sufficient number of emergency shelter units available to serve families year-round. For several years now, advocates have pressed for one-for-one replacement of the 280 units of shelter at DC General with small scale, apartment-style, short-term, shelter programs. Without this one-for-one replacement or evidence that the family homelessness crisis is significantly diminished, it would be foolish to close DC General. The identified replacement units should be apartment-style and perhaps master-leased as New York City does.

The Mayor's FY 15 budget designates funding to explore redevelopment of DC General. These funds should be used to investigate potential replacements for DC General that respect the intent of Council that families be sheltered in apartment-style units and look to all Wards of the city for appropriate, small-scale buildings. Any programs being phased-out due to federal funding changes should of course be considered for usage as family shelter first.

Finally and most importantly, the Council should ensure adequate funding in DHS' FY 2015 Budget to address any shortfalls: The Mayor's budget for DHS leaves the agency with between a \$1.4 and \$10.6 million shortfall in its FY 15 budget for services for homeless families.

DHS' budget oversight responses indicate that it may intend to address this gap largely by shortchanging our youngest and most vulnerable DC residents: homeless children. The agency's response to question 19 indicates it plans to limit the capacity at DC General to "150 long term placements, with no use of hotels" and that if necessary, "a small overflow capacity could be added at DC General during hypothermia alerts." Although not clear, this seems to indicate that the agency may be planning to use one-night placements next winter.

The Legal Clinic and other advocates are extremely concerned about the impact of such a course of action on vulnerable homeless children, on domestic violence survivors, and on homeless parents in need of a safe place from which to search for work and affordable, safe housing. If this is in fact the agency's plan, it would represent our number one concern this budget season and we would ask that instead, the Council make DHS' budget whole and pass the Dignity Act so that families are sheltered safely and continuously until they find alternative safe shelter or housing. This has been DC practice for nearly 20 years and for good reason: because it protects DC homeless children and ensures their parents have a stable place from which to begin to put the pieces of their lives back together again.

Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.