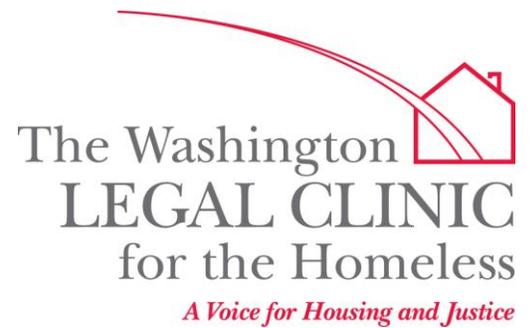


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**Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services  
Oversight Roundtable on Safety Procedures at DC General Family Shelter  
Presented by Kristi Matthews  
September 19, 2014**

Good morning, Councilmember Graham and members of the Committee. My name is Kristi Matthews and I am the Grass Roots Advocacy Coordinator for 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. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today with regard to safety for families at DC General.

Each of the findings and recommendations of the Report are significant, but I would like to take a moment to look more deeply at some of the issues that can lead a parent experiencing homelessness to have what may seem to outsiders as poor judgment about who to trust. While not specifically addressed in the report, I think this is not only relevant to what happened to Relisha Rudd's family, but it also will help the community understand the impact on families of DC's current policies and procedures for homeless families – a system that I believe is broken.

Learned helplessness can occur when someone is put into an environment where they learn to accept negative situations because they have no control over changing them. When we look at homelessness and the systems in place to "help" one through homelessness, we must examine how we as a community have created space for people to adapt to helplessness in order to receive any assistance. For families, this is the reality for how they gain entry to the shelter system or are even considered for basic support or services.

First instead of being deemed as homeless by simply coming to apply for shelter, families must prove that they have nowhere else to go and have exhausted all possible resources. They have to show that they are "helpless" over whether or not they can find a safe place for their children to stay. This process requires them to provide proof that they are out of resources and control over where they sleep. Their reality is not enough to consider them homeless; they must provide numbers for those with whom they have stayed in order for staff to verify that they cannot return for one more night.

The process of having someone else call their family and friends and plead that they be allowed to return already sets up a unique environment. If the staff is able to “convince” families or friends to allow the person to return, they have already instilled the seeds for lack of control over one’s own situation. Conversely, the staff lack of success is what defines a family as homeless not the family’s own described reality. This also takes control away from them. The general distrust of information provided by a family also teaches the family that their own account of things and judgment is not trustworthy so that they start to question themselves.

Once a family is placed in DC General they continue to lose control over their own lives, their families, and their basic human rights. They are told when they can and cannot enter the shelter, what time they have to return, who is allowed to watch their children, when they can eat, play, or socialize, whether their children can visit family outside the shelter, and who is allowed to visit them in their room in the shelter. We strip them of their ability to make decisions for themselves and their children while at the same time expecting them to leave shelter quickly and be fully independent—clear mixed messages.

The process of adapting to life in DCG is a process of learning to be helpless. Learned helplessness is a consequence of becoming homeless (Goodman, 1991). The lack of control over one’s daily activities and the activities of one’s children creates an environment for one to trust and believe in others more than oneself. One will begin to trust others more than oneself in making decisions for one’s family. Lack of personal control over everyday events creates a system of helplessness for people who are homeless (Goodman, 1991).

City leaders often refer to this as a culture of dependency, but we have to remember that we have devised a culture/system whereby in order for people to get help meeting their basic needs they must prove they cannot survive on their own. They must display some level of helplessness to be considered worthy for rudimentary services. This is why a system of helplessness is a more accurate way to describe what is being created in our city.

While we try to reexamine individuals and how they contribute to what we deem as their own downfall, we must take a cold hard look at the systems that DC has operated for many years that are being used as blueprints to create broken people in order for them to receive help. Many people who are homeless have testified that they want nothing more than to have their lives back. They want to be able to take care of their families independently, with no government support.

I would like to call attention to this Administration’s practice of turning away families from the front door of the shelter, except when the temperatures are below freezing. Failing to provide shelter year-round puts already-vulnerable and at-risk families in even greater harms’ way. Living in cars, remaining in abusive situations, hiding in vacant buildings and other unsafe places – these are the situations that DC’s shelter system has said are

acceptable for nearly eight months a year. When families live in these settings, their needs grow and they become even more vulnerable to learned helplessness and the dangers that accompany it.

Unfortunately, even during frigid temperatures, DC's system is set up to only assist when one has exhausted all personal resources, and even then, we set people up in programs that force them to just barely survive, rather than thrive and grow. We have to move from a system that creates helplessness to a system that gives people back control over their lives. Until we do this we will continue to see others fall through the cracks, in part because they've been taught to mistrust themselves and their own judgments.

Specifically with regard to the report, Finding 15 states "the Review reaffirmed that large family shelters are no place to raise children." The finding goes on to state that there is an urgency to close DC General and replace it with alternative housing options and, in the short-term, to make the shelter a safer place. We commend the government for recognizing this dual goal and believe that recommendations 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3, which include weekly inspections of the facility by DGS, increased security at the facility, and the transmission of a plan by September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, to the Mayor detailing "the necessary steps with appropriate timelines for developing alternative smaller shelter options for homeless families" are essential reforms. Goodman, L., Saxe, L., Harvey, M. 1991. *Homelessness as Psychological Trauma*. *American Psychologist*. 46 (11)

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