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Testimony before Mayor-Elect Bowser's Health, Homelessness and Human Services Transition Committee

Good afternoon, members of the Transition Committee. My name is Patricia Mullahy Fugere. Since 1991, I have served as the executive director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. The Legal Clinic envisions – and for 28 years 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. We are pleased to be able to share our recommendations with you today regarding the homeless services system and several other vital safety net programs.

Homeless Services for Single Adults

Expand Permanent Supportive Housing - We support the recommendations of The Way Home Campaign to end chronic homelessness in DC by the end of 2016. This will require an increased investment in Permanent Supportive Housing, but it is an investment that will bring great returns, not only in financial terms (e.g. savings on emergency room visits, 911 calls, and even incarceration), but in human terms, as well. The Housing First model of PSH is a hugely successful model for bringing chronically homeless residents off the street and into the safety and dignity of their own home.

Coordinated Entry – We support current efforts of the Interagency Council on Homelessness to build out coordinated entry to include more of the available housing options in the District's inventory. We urge that the data generated by this new coordinated system be used to identify the gaps in both services and housing, and that future budgets and policy be built in response to those gaps. We also recommend that the Bowser Administration support and implement the ICH strategic planning efforts to shift the system to smaller and more humane facilities and more diversified services.

Location of Singles Shelters – There is a significant part of the single adult shelter system that is now proximate to development activities such as Capitol Crossing, NY Avenue redevelopment, and St. E's East Campus. The Bowser Administration must undertake planning efforts to determine how to replace capacity that stands to be lost if facilities are taken off line, and we urge that residents of the affected shelters be included in that planning. The principles developed by the CCNV Task Force to guide redevelopment of the Federal City Shelter property can be used as a roadmap for similar planning elsewhere in the District. The DC Council has now incorporated those principles into law; key among them: no facility should be taken off line until full replacement capacity is available; there should be a mix of housing and shelter in the replacement capacity that responds to the particular needs of the residents.



Emergency Rental Assistance Program

ERAP has proven to be an effective homelessness prevention tool, helping households who face a particular hardship to pay back rent or a security deposit and first month's rent, so that they can avoid, or move out of, homelessness. We'd like to highlight two ways that can be made more cost effective. First, if assistance were made available earlier in the eviction process, ERAP funds would not be needed to cover the additional expenses of a Writ of Eviction. ERAP providers should also link with legal services providers to ensure that there are no illegal charges on a rent ledger prior to payment.

We also recommend that the Bowser Administration expand ERAP in two ways. First, overall funding for the program should be restored to at least the FY 2014 levels, to help address the increase in family homelessness. Second, we urge Mayor Bowser to expand the program to cover non-elderly, non-disabled individuals. This population is particularly appropriate for ERAP assistance because they often can afford the rent going forward, but a minor economic crisis such as missed work due to a short-term illness or a car breakdown can lead to eviction absent a small amount of government assistance.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

We have three basic recommendations that we believe will strengthen the TANF program and better support District parents who in turn try so very hard to support their families.

First, we recommend that the Bowser Administration repeal the most recent TANF benefit cut that went into effect on October 1, 2014. More than 6,000 families who saw a reduction in their monthly benefit already have experienced two rounds of TANF cuts. A family of three who has been on TANF longer than 60 months now receives \$152/month. This amount is so low it will keep those families in a constant state of crisis.

Next, we recommend that the new Administration invest in programs that effectively work with families who have barriers to employment. It is absolutely vital that these programs train and hire qualified staff to ensure that the programs – *and the families who engage those programs* – have the best chance at success. We also recommend that the Department of Human Services exercise effective oversight of these programs and the vendors who run them.

Finally, we urge Mayor Bowser to create time limit exemptions for families who are pursuing education and higher education opportunities.

Interim Disability Assistance

We recommend that the Bowser Administration support additional funding for this important safety net program. IDA provides a very small monthly grant (\$274/month) to residents who have a disability, cannot work, and await a determination on their application for federal SSI or SSDI. Presently, the program has a list of approximately 150 applicants who wait between four and six months before they are able to access assistance. We hope that Mayor-elect Bowser will recognize how important a tool this grant can be, helping residents to avoid homelessness (e.g. by making a small contribution to a friend or relative to sleep on his couch or stay in a spare room) and meet other urgent needs, and that the Administration will fund the program at an appropriate level to eliminate the waiting list.