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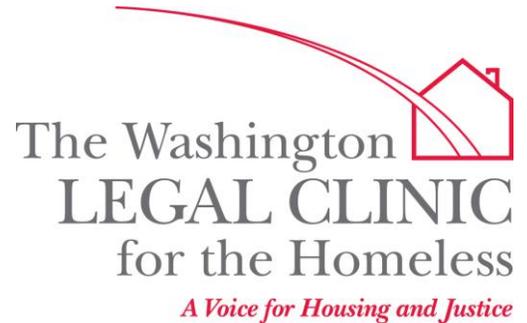
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**Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole
Public Roundtable on the Interagency Council on Homelessness
Strategic Plan to End Homelessness
Presented by Amber W. Harding
May 15, 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. As you know, 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.

The Legal Clinic believes that the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Strategic Plan provides a smart, humane blueprint for ending homelessness. We want to highlight some areas that stand out to us as particularly on point. The Plan emphasizes the following principles:

1. Housing is the primary solution to homelessness. While of course there are other factors at play in preventing and ending homelessness, in DC the primary factor is the lack of affordable housing.
2. DC must have an emergency shelter safety net that is available year-round, regardless of the weather. We have a commitment from this Administration to ensure that all families with no safe place to sleep at night are able to access emergency shelter year-round. That has not happened in more than four years. While we're still working with families who are sleeping in cars and abandoned buildings, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has begun to admit some families even when the temperatures are above freezing.
3. While people are homeless, they will not thrive in large institutional settings. DC must transform its shelter system into smaller 24 hour facilities for all populations.
4. DC needs a broader range of permanent housing interventions, including an improved rapid rehousing model, permanent supportive housing, targeted affordable housing, and other affordable housing.
5. DC must increase and strengthen its efforts to prevent homelessness.
6. DC must reduce all possible barriers to housing, which includes looking at unreasonable tenant screening practices by landlords as well as ensuring that DC-funded housing programs follow a Housing First model.
7. DC must focus on helping people experiencing homelessness increase their income, including job training for living wage jobs and maximizing public benefits.

For the Strategic Plan to be successful, though, it depends on the following:

1. Funding.
2. Development of a comprehensive affordable housing strategy outside of the homeless services system, to preserve affordable housing, prevent people from becoming homeless and expand the inventory of affordable housing that can end residents' homelessness. Then that strategy must actually be funded and implemented.
3. Recognition of the interrelatedness of programs that address the needs of low-income residents, including programs that improve education at all levels, income support for all populations, and job readiness and connections for all who can work.
4. Fixing its broken Office of Shelter Monitoring (OSM). OSM could be the conduit for client complaints about everything from poor conditions to poor services, which would be a critical tool in the agency's efforts to improve its services and hold its contractors to a high standard of performance.
5. Overhauling its centralized family intake system to ensure that homeless families are served respectfully, appropriately, and effectively. The family intake system is high barrier and often adversarial, which results in lost opportunities for meaningful engagement and assistance at the front door. Because it is so difficult to navigate intake, even when the family is in crisis, families in shelter are more reluctant to take riskier housing placements such as rapid rehousing, because they do not trust that they will be allowed back into shelter if another crisis occurs.

The Mayor made a good start on funding the plan, and she made some hard political choices to do so, like increasing the sales tax. But she did not fully fund the plan. Without additional key investments from the Council in FY16, DC will not end chronic and family homelessness by the deadlines. In particular:

1. DC will not end chronic homelessness by 2017 without the following increases in funding:
 - ✓ \$1.8 million in Permanent Supportive Housing to house 115 individuals;
 - ✓ \$1.65 million in Targeted Affordable Housing to house 138 individuals; and
 - ✓ \$1 million in Rapid Re-housing to house 100 individuals.¹
2. DC will not end family homelessness by 2018 without the following increase in funding:
 - ✓ Increase Local Rent Supplement Program tenant vouchers by \$5 million to prevent 333 families on the DCHA waiting list from entering shelter.²

The Mayor's budget includes housing resources that are critical to exiting families quickly from shelter or a housing program that wasn't the right fit—so called Targeted

¹ These gaps in funding are noted in the Department of Human Services committee report. The numbers here are slightly lower to recognize that Councilmember Cheh sent over \$650,000 for Targeted Affordable Housing. She also sent money over to the Committee to fill a gap in services for parenting minors.

² The Committee on Housing included this recommendation in their committee report as an unfunded but critical need.

Affordable Housing. All tenant vouchers, including new LRSP tenant vouchers and all federal and local vouchers that are turned back in, will be devoted to referrals from DHS of families who are in the homeless services system. We support this dedication of resources, but are concerned about what may happen when shelter becomes the *only* door to affordable housing for families.

There are 41,000 households on the DCHA waiting list, over 20,000 of which are homeless. There are many homeless families who have been on the waiting list for a long time but haven't yet come into shelter. By failing to fund an alternative door to housing, homeless families will be forced to enter the more costly emergency shelter system (\$50,000 per year versus \$15,000 per year for a voucher). DC needs tenant vouchers that go to homeless families on the waiting list to prevent those families from entering emergency shelters and to prevent shelter from becoming the only door to affordable housing in DC.

Finally, the Plan will not achieve its goals unless the DC Council and the Mayor understand the interrelatedness of other DC programs and their role in preventing or ending homelessness. For instance, DC needs to consider the impact of cutting TANF benefits to 6000 families when our experience shows that many families are staying out of shelter only because of that small amount of assistance. It's penny-wise and pound foolish to cut families off of TANF when that means they will be coming into DC General at \$50,000 a year. And it's punishing the wrong party—families on TANF aren't the ones who failed to implement exemptions or improve job programs.

The DC Council plays a critical role in ensuring that the Strategic Plan is a success, in particular that DC reaches the clear benchmarks set out in the plan: not just through oversight, but through a meaningful partnership with the Mayor. For the first time in my 15 years working on policies around homelessness in DC, we have a Mayor and a Council who are aligned philosophically and committed to ending homelessness. If you work together and find adequate funding for the housing identified in the plan, DC *will* end veteran homelessness this year, end chronic homelessness by 2017, and make all homelessness brief and nonrecurring by 2020.