

DC Council Committee of the Whole
Hearing on the FY2013 Budget Request Act and Budget Support Act
April 30, 2012

Testimony of Patricia Mullahy Fugere, Executive Director
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Good afternoon Chairman Brown and members of the Council. My name is Patricia Mullahy Fugere. For more than 20 years, I have served as Executive Director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, a not-for-profit legal services and advocacy organization working with residents of the District of Columbia who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. The Legal Clinic envisions a just and inclusive community for *all* residents of this great city, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive.

A little more than three years ago, the DC Council declared the nation's capital to be a "Human Rights City." As on many issues, DC was a leader in doing so, the first US city to embrace formally the notion of human rights as the guiding principals towards which this community would strive. What a great moment of pride, to be part of a community that held up the importance of human dignity and freedom, of the right to assemble and speak freely and marry whomever we loved and wished to commit our life to.

But we stopped short, and the budget on which you will be voting in several weeks falls perilously short, of giving the notion of "human rights" true and full meaning for all of this community's residents.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Why have we not as a community embraced this aspect of human rights?

The proposed budget pulls support from parents who are desperate to be employable and who have been struggling to find a job, but who have not yet been able to do so in this volatile economy.

It cuts back the safety net for a number of people with disabilities who are not able to work, who need a little bit of help, for a relatively short period of time, while they await a determination on their application for federal benefits.

It seriously compromises the ability of community organizations to bring significant private resources to the table to develop affordable housing for low- and no- income DC residents.

It threatens to close down half of our single adult shelter system except during hypothermia season, and it eliminates essential supports in our homeless services system such as food, outreach and transportation, as well.

It leaves children and their parents who have exhausted all other possible avenues of support to fend for themselves on the streets of this city, in abandoned buildings, hospital emergency rooms...or possibly worse.

How did the District of Columbia shift from being a human rights city to a city whose leaders

- tolerate cutting back the meager support that a TANF grant provides;
- serve only about one-third of the more than 2000 residents with disabilities who are likely eligible for an Interim Disability Assistance check that could quite possibly be the difference between that person staying stable and housed or their ending up on the street;
- turn their back on millions of dollars in private development funds that could be leveraged by grants from the Housing Production Trust Fund or a steady income stream from the Local Rent Subsidy Program, while many tens of thousands of households are waiting - for years on end - for subsidized housing;
- are willing to turn 750 adults out of shelters to sleep in doorways, alleys and parks;
- can look a child in the eye and say that she or he is not worthy of a decent and safe place to call home.

We are talking about our family members, our neighbors, our friends. These are not strangers who flock to the District for some imagined golden safety net. They are the patients that we turned out of St. Elizabeth's Hospital but failed to support in the community. They are the young adults who aged out of our foster care system, whom we sent off with little more than a "good luck and have a nice life." They are the students who were failed by our school system, graduating ill-prepared to enter the workforce. They are families whose bank accounts were left broken by the Great Recession, but whose spirit and determination stays strong and who only, for a short while, need a helping hand that we have become reluctant to extend. They are our community.

Your vote in several weeks can take us back towards reclaiming our "human rights" nature, or will shift us even further away. As you vote on the Budget and Budget Support Act, we urge you to:

- add \$4 million dollars to sustain housing for 250 homeless families, so that families can be moved out of hotels into newly vacant shelter space, and families with no safe place to stay can access housing year round; and direct the Department of Human Services to fill any vacancies that become available, even when it is not hypothermia season;
- maintain the current priorities in the Mayor's wish-list, so that homeless services can sustain the progress it has made in recent years, TANF sanctions will be delayed until viable work supports and opportunities are made available, and new housing can be developed;
- assure that any IDA expenditures that are reimbursed with federal funds are re-directed back into that program to serve additional eligible residents.

Your vote on May 15th will decide what sort of District of Columbia we will be. I hope and pray that it is the District of Columbia that you envisioned back in 2008 when you were a leader in embracing human rights.