

Committee on Human Services
Councilmember Jim Graham, Chairperson
Hearing on Department of Human Services FY 13 Proposed Budget
Thursday, April 19, 2012, 11:00 AM

Testimony of Amber W. Harding
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Mayor Gray has said that he “believe[s] that every DC resident deserves a decent, safe and affordable place to live. (<http://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-vincent-c-gray-focusing-resources-affordable-housing>.) But the Mayor’s proposed FY13 budget fails to fill a \$7 million budget gap in homeless services, *reduces* affordable housing funding, and doesn’t provide sufficient funding to provide lifesaving shelter to kids who are homeless year-round.

Director Berns has stated that the Administration would try to fill the FY13 budget gap by making cuts to “non-capacity services,” which include transportation, outreach, meals, and/or supportive services. Any cut to homeless services will hurt people who are homeless and cuts in such services could have as grave an impact as eliminating shelter beds, and could risk legal liability when there is a right to shelter. Our concerns include:

- Without transportation assistance, how will people get to the shelters that are now primarily located on the outskirts of the city?
- Without outreach services, who will bring people blankets and hot drinks and try to convince them to come into shelter when they are risking hypothermia?
- Shelter residents are not allowed to store or cook their own food in shelters. Without even transportation to community food providers, how will they eat?
- Without supportive services, how will people access mental and physical health care, get a job or get housing? How will they get out of shelter?

In addition to the proposed cuts for next year, DC has already made many changes in law and practice that appear designed to discourage shelter access, such as:

- closing downtown shelters;
- limiting families' right to apartment-style shelter;
- diminishing the right to shelter by demanding applicants prove they have no safe place to sleep and by requiring proof of DC residency;
- failing to serve homeless families year-round, choosing only to allow families into shelter when they are legally required to do so; and
- referring families who have no safe place to sleep for an abuse and neglect investigation, instead of just providing the very service they are seeking: shelter.

Yet, despite the fact that it is harder and harder to access emergency shelter, folks who are homeless are not going away. In fact, child and family homelessness has risen dramatically over the last few years.¹

This year we're paying a significant price for our failure to invest adequately in affordable housing in past years. Our family shelter capacity was overwhelmed with families this past winter and consequently, DHS was forced to rely on motels to meet the need. The cost of these motel rooms is staggering and wasteful—more than \$3 million just for the winter. While DC did the right and lawful thing by putting families up in motels when there was no other space, they could avoid this expensive and inadequate solution by preparing a budget that anticipates the *actual need* from year to year instead of just using the prior year's baseline budget.

DC also needs to eliminate practices that suppress the need and chill applications for services, such as the current practice of responding to a request for shelter with the threat of a Child Protective Services (“CPS”) investigation for abuse and neglect if the family has no safe place to sleep. DHS has said that workers followed through on very few of these threats this winter. This is likely for one of the following reasons: 1) there is a right to shelter in the winter; 2) some workers may understand the inappropriateness of reporting a family to CPS for poverty alone—the law states that the term “neglected child” does not include a child who is deprived as a result of “the lack of financial means of his or her parent, guardian or custodian” (DC Code Section 16-2301(9)(A)(ii)); and, most importantly, 3) many clients we have spoken to left the family intake center, despite having nowhere to go, because they feared losing their children.

I have a daughter who is 16 months old. If my family had nowhere to go and a shelter worker said to me “There is no shelter and if you tell me you have no safe place to sleep I will have to report you to CPS,” I would say “oh, my friend just called and said we can stay with her” and I would hightail it out of there. Why would I risk losing my child when there isn't even the possibility of getting any shelter?

How many families share my fear and instinct to flee when faced with this threat? These are the children who are most at risk of harm, not because of anything their parents are doing or not doing for them, but precisely because of what the DC government is failing to provide them with—the most basic safety net service of emergency shelter. If the lack of shelter is the very thing that is placing children at risk, then DC should respond by providing shelter and housing to those families, not raising the specter of losing their children.

¹ From 2008 to 2011—the first three years of the Great Recession—family homelessness in the District increased by 46%. From 2011 to 2012, an even greater increase occurred: the number of families in the city's hypothermia shelters at the end of the 2011 - 2012 winter season was nearly 2.5 times higher than last year (an increase of 138%).

The Smart and Simple Response: Housing Ends Homelessness

Let's not play games with children's lives. The Council should restore the shortfall in DHS' budget and invest in affordable housing to resolve this dilemma now. For a small amount of money spent wisely, the city could house 500 children (250 families) in crisis and create enough space in the shelter system to ensure that no child is left outside. Without swift DC Council action on behalf of homeless children, the odds are not in their favor.