

**TESTIMONY OF SCOTT MCNEILLY  
WASHINGTON LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS  
BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE  
OVERSIGHT ON THE 2010-2011 WINTER PLAN  
OCTOBER 6, 2010**

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Good afternoon Councilmember Wells and members of the Committee. My name is Scott McNeilly and I am a Staff Attorney with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. I am also an appointed member of the Interagency Council on Homelessness and a member of the ICH's Operations and Logistics Committee which worked on developing the draft Winter Plan.

In the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA) of 2005, this Council delegated to the ICH the responsibility for developing the Winter Plan and established a deadline of September 1<sup>st</sup> for finalizing that Plan. Notably, the HSRA contains no delegation of authority or planning responsibility to the Mayor or the Department of Human Services. However, the ICH lacks the capacity to identify and secure shelter or other facilities, budget the necessary funds or contract with providers to operate programs.

I have been involved in the development of the Winter Plan for many years. With the thoughtful and effective guidance of the Committee Chair, Chapman Todd, the Operations and Logistics Committee's process has continued to improve from year to year. We've tried to develop a data driven method for estimating the need, we've had long and detailed discussions about every aspect of implementing the Plan, the Committee meetings have been open, inviting and well attended and the Committee has gathered extensive input from the community. However, as in years past, the District government's inability to identify and secure sites and resources in a timely fashion has frustrated the planning process and left us, now over a month past the statutory deadline, without a finalized Winter Plan.

Because of the horrible and dangerous experiences of families at the DC General shelter last winter, developing an adequate Plan for families was the primary concern and focus for many participants in the planning process this year. We strongly support the District's emphasis on permanent housing as the primary means of addressing the needs of the dramatically increased number of homeless families. However, because of concerns about whether it's realistic to rely almost exclusively on a housing strategy, I along with others have argued that we need some kind of back up plan. In the final Committee meeting before the scheduled September 23<sup>rd</sup> ICH vote on the Plan, DHS presented a revised Table 3 to Appendix D that included a 75 unit overflow facility for families. The facility was described as a District owned building in a neighborhood. We were told that the building would only require minor, inexpensive enhancements to be serviceable and the layout of the facility was such that any money invested would not be lost because the building could be a component of our newly developed strategic action plan. During a conference call on September 14<sup>th</sup> to discuss final edits to the Plan, we were again assured that the District had "site control" of the new family overflow building and everything was in place if it needed to be brought on line. We were told we could not know the location of the building because there was some political issue related to announcement of the site.

Between that September 14<sup>th</sup> conference call and the delivery of the Plan to the broader ICH membership, something happened and that site was removed from the Plan. The rumor I've heard is that it happened because of objections by the Councilmember for the Ward where the facility would be located. If that's the case, it implies that there are some District residents who are not worthy of living in our neighborhoods and that's a notion that should repulse us all and that we should combat. The Plan we were sent and that we were expected to vote on at the September 23<sup>rd</sup> ICH meeting instead included an additional 100 shelter units on top of the 135 current units at DC General.

Because of the last minute changes to the Plan, concerns about the risks involved in a 235 unit facility at DC General and the waste involved in renovating it (and the fact that the vote likely would not have approved the Plan), the City Administrator decided not to conduct a vote on September 23<sup>rd</sup>

and asked the Committee to go back and revisit the capacity for families. At our September 29<sup>th</sup> follow-up meeting, DHS presented the Committee with a revised Plan that included a new 29 unit transitional facility for families with a head of household between the ages of 18 and 24, and 71 additional housing units for families on top of the 80 in the original Plan.

We've now begun hearing rumors that this new 29 unit building may also be subject to some political controversy that may make it unavailable. This only adds to the anxiety about whether we really are prepared to meet what we all recognize as an unprecedented demand for housing and shelter for families. Again, we fully support the District's emphasis on permanent housing and the commitment to provide the additional units should be celebrated. But for the proposed Plan to work, DHS will have to do something it's never been able to do before – house families throughout the hypothermia season at a faster rate than they present for emergency shelter. To succeed, it will have to be at a significantly faster rate because DC General is currently full and the number of families that continue to arrive at the Family Resource Center with nowhere to go may leave us with a significant number of families on the pending list on the first hypothermia/right to shelter night. We all desperately hope they succeed but the draft Winter Plan contains only a promise that additional capacity will be identified if they don't. You'll remember that the Plan last year relied heavily on DHS' ability to house families in a timely fashion and we saw how that turned out and last year at this time, priority one families were able to access shelter.

The other major cause for concern is the impending closure of the La Casa shelter in Columbia Heights. Historically, many of the men who have stayed at La Casa have relied on meal, employment and other programs that are located in the immediate Columbia Heights neighborhood. For that reason and because there may be language or other cultural barriers, many people are worried that men who are homeless in Columbia Heights will not travel to far Southeast or Northeast for shelter and will instead take the risk of sleeping on the streets. This could have a disparate impact on the Latino men who have relied on La Casa and could result in hypothermia deaths or injuries.

Although we've known for years that the La Casa site would eventually close for redevelopment, the District has not identified an alternative neighborhood site. The District's offered response to the La Casa closing is again that we should be focused on housing. The problem is that it's not enough to have one effective program – we have to respond to the need. The only housing DHS controls is the Permanent Supportive Housing program that provides lifetime subsidies and support services. By DHS' own estimate, that intensive level of service is only appropriate for between 20 and 25 percent of the shelter population. For the remaining 75 to 80 percent, there is no affordable, available housing option. The District's Housing Authority has over 30,000 applicants on its waiting list, more than 13,000 of whom have a homeless preference, and a number of studies have shown that we've experienced a significant net loss of affordable housing units in the District in the past few years. Because we will not be able to deliver shelter or housing to a significant number of men in the neighborhood where they live, we need to ensure that there is some method for transporting men from Columbia Heights to available shelter and then back in the morning to the vicinity of the programs they rely on in Columbia Heights. If we're not able to do that, it's likely that many men simply won't go and will risk freezing. The current draft Plan still has "TBD" for the drop off location for evening transportation and no provision for transportation back to Columbia Heights in the morning.

Because the success of the plan is so dependent on DHS's ability to move families and individuals into housing, the Operations and Logistics Committee has asked for and been promised a weekly report that will track the number of people housed, when they were housed and the number of applicants for family shelter. The Human Services Committee may want to receive and monitor the same report. And because the District may need to make mid-season corrections if the flow to housing doesn't keep pace with the need, it would be extremely helpful for this Committee to schedule additional oversight hearings as the season progresses.

Thank you for your work on and continuing concern about the Winter Planning process.