

Committee on Human Services
Councilmember Jim Graham, Chairperson
Performance Oversight Hearing on Department of Human Services
Wednesday, March 13, 2013, 11:00 AM

Testimony of Marta Beresin

Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Marta Beresin and I am a staff attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH). My testimony today will address what corrective actions the Department of Human Services (“DHS”) must take and investments the DC government should make to ensure the District is meeting its legal mandates during hypothermia season as well as providing year-round access to assistance for Priority 1 homeless families with no safe place to stay. This commitment will require a combination of improved monitoring of the shelter intake process by DHS, including the implementation of policies and protocol to guide the family shelter intake process, as well as adequate investments in proven prevention and affordable housing programs.

Recommendation 1: Improved monitoring of the Family Resource Center (FRC) shelter intake process by the Department of Human Services.

Adequate monitoring and oversight by DHS of its contractors is the key to ensuring fair and just access to family shelter services and compliance with due process and DC law. The Legal Clinic’s Winter Report makes several recommendations for improving oversight of this vital DC service. I’d like to highlight three of those recommendations.

First, DHS should implement and train FRC staff on the Priority 1 Family Protocol that DHS has been discussing with advocates since at least June 2010. These protocol outline the standards for determining whether an emergency exists such that a family should be placed in temporary shelter or housing on the day of application. No such written protocol exists today and, as a consequence, the life-saving public benefit of emergency shelter is often doled out in an arbitrary and capricious manner that impacts the lives of DC children every day.

Second, DHS must take steps to completely overhaul the Office of Shelter Monitoring so that it becomes an effective tool for investigating and responding to complaints of shelter applicants and residents. OSM staff should sit in on intake sessions at FRC and make unannounced visits to shelters to talk to residents.

Currently, complaints go unresponded to and the Office is not fulfilling any of its mandates laid out in the Homeless Services Reform Act.

Third, DHS should return to its former policy of allowing Legal Clinic outreach volunteers inside the Family Resource Center to distribute know your rights materials. If legislation mandating that legal advisers be permitted inside FRC is necessary, we would ask the Council to consider this. Know your rights outreach provides a vital link to the monitoring capacity of DHS and The Community Partnership.

Recommendation 2: Adequate funding for prevention and permanent affordable housing to relieve pressure on FRC and DHS to turn families away who are in immediate need of shelter.

An appropriate annual investment in permanent affordable housing for homeless families is essential to relieve the pressure on DHS and its contractors to deny assistance, sometimes illegally, to eligible Priority 1 families. From 2000-2010, the District lost 50% of its affordable housing units or more than 35,000 units.¹ Combined with the recession and unemployment rates that remain persistently high for formerly low-wage workers, this massive loss of affordable units has resulted in a 73% increase in family homelessness in DC since 2008. For these reasons, our family shelter system is busting at the seams and only a firm, annual commitment to affordable housing will provide the necessary relief valve and make residing at DC General a less traumatic experience for families.

On March 7th, 286 families (or nearly 1,000 people) called DC General Emergency Family Shelter home, including – as many newspaper accounts have mentioned – nearly 600 children. As was made clear at the Roundtable that you hosted at DC General, what families at DC General need is affordable housing. And if we were smart, it's what we'd invest in because it costs less per day/per family than shelter², is significantly more humane, and has been proven to move families towards greater economic self-sufficiency.³ Parents residing at DC General aren't looking for handouts; they're looking for a hand up. And studies

¹DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Disappearing Act: Affordable Housing in DC is Vanishing Amid Sharply Rising Housing Costs, <http://www.dcfpi.org/disappearing-act-affordable-housing-in-dc-is-vanishing-amid-sharply-rising-housing-costs>. (A "low-cost rental unit" is defined as having monthly rent and utility costs of less than \$750 a month.)

² Sheltering a family at DC General costs the city \$54,000/year. The average LRSP voucher costs the District \$15,000/year.

³ See The Value of Housing Subsidies to Welfare Reform Efforts, Sard and Lubell, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1593>. Housing subsidies increase employment outcomes by: 1) helping families stabilize their lives so they can concentrate on employment; 2) reducing a family's housing costs so there is more income available for work-related expenses such as child care, work clothes, and transportation; and 3) giving families more neighborhood choice allowing them to live in areas of greater job opportunity.

have consistently shown that stable, affordable housing improves the ability of families to secure and retain employment.⁴

Thanks to the DC Council, this winter the Department of Human Services (DHS) had at its disposal 250 Local Rent Supplement Vouchers for the most vulnerable homeless families, the first investment in LRSP vouchers since 2008. Because of this infusion of vouchers, DHS did not need to rely on hotel placements this winter until the last week of January. In contrast, last winter when no housing subsidies were funded, DHS began relying on hotel placements for homeless families the last week of November, a full two months earlier. Hotel placements peaked last winter at an all-time record of 235 homeless families placed in hotels on February 19th, 2012. As of February 19th, 2013, due to the availability of LRSP vouchers to assist families exiting shelter, there were only 68 homeless families in DHS hotel placements.

With another small investment in LRSP vouchers for homeless families in FY 14, the District can end homelessness for every family currently at DC General and in the hotels. By doing so, DHS will be able to serve Priority 1 families with no safe place to sleep year-round, not just on hypothermic nights during the winter. With an annual commitment to funding new LRSP vouchers, the average length of stay at DC General will be shorter, and DHS may be able to reduce the overall number of families at DC General at any one time. Reducing the size of this facility is key to addressing many of the concerns DC General residents raised at the Roundtable. HVAC problems, the prevalence of so many airborne viruses, and the emotional stresses of living communally all correlate with the large number of families currently residing at DC General.

The District needs to ensure families are served with programs that provide permanent solutions to their homelessness. Director Berns testified at the DC General Roundtable that 40% of families at DC General had previously resided in shelter. A significant amount of resources have been dedicated to Rapid Rehousing over the past few years with little assessment of its effectiveness for homeless families in a high rent jurisdiction like DC. We recommend that DHS engage in a robust collection of data and statistics before investing additional resources in Rapid Rehousing and focus instead on permanent solutions proven to be successful such as LRSP.

We must ensure year-round, fair, just and legal access to services for homeless families and turn the trend of increasing family homelessness and over-crowded family shelters around in the District. We can do this with adequate monitoring and oversight and smart investments in proven programs like ERAP and LRSP. District children and families deserve no less.

I'm happy to answer any questions.

⁴ Id.