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**DC Council Committee on Human Services
Oversight Hearing on Department of Human Services
March 8, 2018
Amber W. Harding**

Good morning Chairperson Nadeau and Council members. My name is Amber Harding and I'm an attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. 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.

These annual oversight hearings are usually an opportunity for the public to share with the Council their experiences with the services and performance of the agency over the last year. But we just spent a year and a half testifying and publicly sharing our most significant concerns with the provision of shelter and services to low-income DC residents—the end result was a bill that makes it harder for people experiencing homelessness to get the help they need. I don't think this body or this agency lacks sufficient information on the injustices that our clients experience on a daily basis. I fear a lack of political will and a troubling ideology explain why these problems persist.

The problem is not in what this agency, this Administration or this Council say they believe. DC has claimed the mantle of a “Human Rights City” since 2008. Last fall, the DC Council unanimously passed the Sense of the Council on Establishing Race, Equity, and Social Justice Resolution of 2017. DC claims to be progressive, claims to be focused on affordable housing, and claims to be humane—often juxtaposed with the Trump Administration. The problem lies not in words, but in actions and inactions.

In the last year, as we engaged in a debate about homeless services, this Council and this agency had an opportunity not just to look for ways to reduce harm but to explore ways to actually improve services and outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. To a significant degree, this Council and this agency refused to take steps to improve services via legislation and instead used the bill as a tool to close the door to help. But the problems persist.

So I ask you to ask the agency what *their* solutions are to the most pressing concerns of their customers. If they have no solutions, I ask this Council what *your* plan is to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are served as they deserve to be served:



1. Improve shelter conditions.

What is the plan to bring the conditions of shelters up to code and to increase the speed of repairs after receiving a complaint? Why did it take days last week to fix the lack of heat and hot water at DC General? Why has it taken weeks to respond to elevator outages and mold at the hotels?

2. Provide shelter to nontraditional family configurations.

What is the plan to provide shelter to couples, many of whom are living on the street because they cannot reside in shelter together?¹ What about adults caring for senior parents or adult siblings?

3. Independent and effective monitoring of services.

Very few clients we speak to bother raising complaints or requesting investigations anymore because the investigation is often minimal and fails to result in relief. What is the plan to develop an independent and appropriately staffed monitoring entity that can and will effectively investigate and resolve client complaints as well as track patterns of service complaints and violations of the law?²

4. Develop case management standards and ratios and accountability for quality services.

What is the plan to develop objective and transparent standards for quality case management in homeless services programs? What accountability measures will be taken for poor or insufficient case management?

5. Expand severe weather definition to include hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards and other inclement weather where harm could occur if DC residents cannot access shelter.

Right now the law only protects people when it is freezing outside. How will DHS ensure that people are safe in shelter during all inclement weather?

6. Ensure intake procedures are humane and reasonable.

How will DHS ensure that people don't have to stand out in the rain while waiting to get into shelter? How will the agency ensure that the new law doesn't increase the barriers to families so much that they are left out in the cold, literally and figuratively, because they lack the exact piece of paper that DHS has decided is critical? Families are regularly asked to provide the leases of all the people they have stayed with to prove that they don't live there even when there is no indication that they were ever anything but a guest. That is far above the legal requirement in current law, and far above the standard in the new law. How will DHS ensure that Virginia Williams Family Resource Center complies with the law, when they are provided no written guidance and when our hundreds of client complaints have done nothing to change their practices?

7. Define success of programs by client stability and satisfaction.

As my colleague testified, a core problem with the Rapid Re-housing program is that DHS defines success by whether a family returns to shelter after the subsidy ends. That is a way to measure whether the agency's own goal of reducing shelter usage is being met, but it blatantly ignores the

¹ The Legal Clinic has been raising this gap in services for about 25 years. (That's not an exaggeration.) At recent ICH ERSO meetings, outreach workers and service providers have estimated between 20 and 50 couples need shelter on any given night, many of whom sleep outside when they cannot get placed together.

² One example of failure to follow up: OSM issued a report indicating that the Community Partnership (TCP) had failed to do required criminal background checks on its employees about 6 months before Relisha Rudd was taken by the TCP janitor at DC General, who had a criminal background. It issued the initial finding but never followed up to ensure compliance.

goals of the family. While families certainly share the goal of avoiding shelter, no family would say that their participation in a program was a “success” if they couldn’t afford food while they were in the program or were evicted right after the subsidy ended. Similarly, the agency touts the “success” of the homelessness prevention program, but that success is measured by how many families they divert from shelter. No one measures, or even asks, whether the family being diverted is satisfied with the diversion or whether the community placement is safe or stable (from the family’s perspective). The agency should not be so blinded by its desire to reduce shelter usage that it fails to consider all other outcomes and experiences of families. How will the agency ensure that rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention appropriately center the stated needs and stability of families when measuring success?

8. Engage in extensive anti-racism training and planning.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, what will this agency’s plan look like, in accordance with the Council’s recent resolution, to “foster race, equity, and social justice in all of the government’s policy-making so as to increase fairness and opportunity for all people, with particular attention to those communities who have historically faced discrimination because of race, class, or gender status in accessing social services?” While this Council may have removed some of the more harmful provisions proposed by this agency in the Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act, it did not and cannot remove the toxic beliefs undergirding those proposals, beliefs that will poison the agency’s policies and interactions with its customers. The agency needs to do that for itself, and it won’t be an easy process.

We continue to press for these changes because our clients need, want, and deserve better. We, along with our strong legal services partners, will continue to look for ways to push these reforms whether in this building or in the courthouse. We welcome your partnership in that work.