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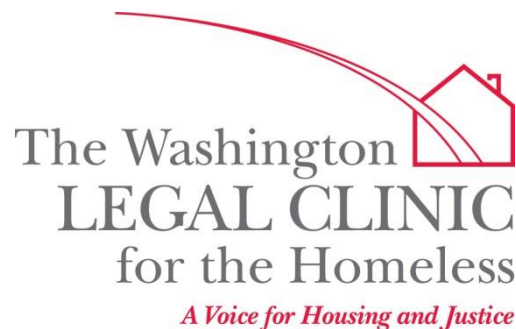
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## Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services Performance Oversight Hearing on the DC Department of Human Services (DHS)

Presented by Max Tipping

March 1, 2019

Good morning Councilmember Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Max Tipping and I am a Staff Attorney and Spitzer Fellow 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. My testimony today will focus on DC’s rapid re-housing programs.

On the singles side, rapid re-housing providers have identified a number of problems, mostly relating to clients not wanting to participate in the program or being unable to find a unit that they could afford after the subsidy ends. The good news is that DHS is working to address these issues, including by extending the subsidy period and changing how individuals are referred to the program. Another change that could help individuals remain in stable housing would be to allow for a flexible subsidy length that is tied to specific job training and placement programs. This current reform effort would also be a good opportunity to put these rules into regulations, as required by the DC Administrative Procedures Act.

On the family side, despite all of the concerns that participants have raised over the years, the District continues to over-invest in temporary housing subsidies, with the number of families in the program increasing by over 25 percent since last year. I’d like to briefly point out some of more notable parts of this year’s oversight data:

- Most importantly, the monthly incomes of families exiting the program went from \$541 in FY17 to \$1715 in FY18, an increase of 217%. Similarly, income at entry increased from \$278 in FY17 to \$1432 in FY18. If correct, this would be terrific news and represent a stunning turnaround for families in the program. But these



figures might be worth a closer look to determine if outliers skewed the averages, given that most of the other data on participant incomes remains relatively unchanged. For example, as in previous years, roughly 80 percent of families in the program received TANF, SSI, or SSDI. In addition, only 13 percent of families increased their income in FY18, with 29 percent having stagnant income and presumably 58 percent with declining incomes, although this last point is unclear.

- Last year's oversight responses reported that 1184 families exited the program in FY17. This figure is now being reported as 668.
- The manner in which exit reasons and destinations are reported has changed for the third time in three years, making comparison difficult or impossible, but some of the new figures are worth noting. It appears that in FY18 and FY19 to date only 48 percent of families exited the program to permanent housing without an ongoing subsidy. Remember this figure would include those families who were exited with monthly incomes below the monthly rent. Similarly, the attachment responding to Question 74 shows that for fully half of the provider organizations, clients' exit rates to permanent housing was 50 percent or less.

While the data continues to provide an unclear and occasionally contradictory picture of what is happening in this program, what is clear is that many families continue to be exited at a point where they stand no realistic chance of affording the rent. It may be reasonable to debate just how many families fall into this gap. However, it is simply indisputable that this is the situation of a substantial portion of families, putting them at risk of debt, damaged credit and rental history, eviction and returning to homelessness.

For our part, the Legal Clinic continues to represent family after family who is struggling in this program. There's the mother of two small children who is working but cannot afford to pay market rent. She is driven and exactly the type of person that rapid re-housing is designed for; she wants to get her GED and increase her income and could do so with appropriate supports and stable housing. However, she currently has to fight for extensions in the program, and if she doesn't secure more time she will have no choice but to start over in shelter again. Then there's the mother whose PTSD and learning disabilities have prevented her from holding down long-term employment. When we first met her, her caseworker didn't even know about these issues, and even after providing supporting documents, the caseworker still did not update the SPDAT assessment to reflect these barriers to long-term stability. Finally, there's the mother who has survived extensive trauma and abuse. As with several of our current rapid re-housing clients, she receives SSI and will never increase her income, but was still told by her caseworker that she was not eligible for a long-term voucher through TAH or PSH.

These issues with the family rapid re-housing program will not go away. As long as temporary subsidies are viewed as the primary answer to homelessness that is driven by out-of-reach housing prices, many of these families will be set up for failure.

On a separate note, the District is currently in the process of redeveloping several of its shelters for single adults. Most notably, it is planning to build a new shelter on the St. Elizabeth's campus that would replace the 801 East Shelter. This represents a rare and exciting opportunity to build a shelter to

specification. However, this Committee should be aware that this project raises a number of concerns due to the fact that the shelter is to be built on a former landfill. As a result, the soil for the site is contaminated (although no one knows how contaminated at this point), the soil contains hazardous gases that require special engineering controls, and constructing a reliable foundation for the building will be difficult and risky. Although the shelter location and design appear to have already been finalized, a contractor has not yet been selected to build it, so there is still time to resolve these issues. While I assume this is primarily something to be addressed by the Department of General Services, I raise it now because I understand that DHS has been and will continue to be very involved in the project.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.