

True Reformer Building
1200 U Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 328-5500
www.legalclinic.org
@washlegalclinic

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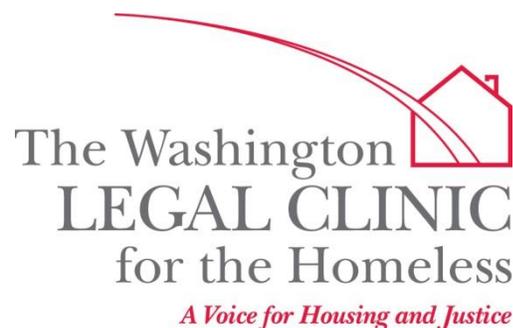
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**Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services
Budget Oversight Hearing on the DC Department of Human Services (DHS)
Presented by Max Tipping
April 10, 2019**

Good morning Chairperson 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. Today I’d like to talk about housing for homeless families and the redevelopment of the singles shelter system.

I’ll start with the bright spots: Mayor Bowser’s proposed budget fully funds the Fair Budget Coalition’s request for Permanent Supportive Housing vouchers for families and makes substantial new capital investments in the shelter system for single adults. These budget items are not inconsequential and we applaud DHS for securing these funds. That being said, significant unmet housing needs remain, and it is crucial that the new shelter projects proceed in an open and transparent manner that prioritizes both client input and safety, which to date has not happened.

Housing for Homeless Families

In regards to housing for homeless families, the Fair Budget Coalition’s platform included 984 Targeted Affordable Housing (“TAH”) vouchers, but the Mayor’s budget only includes funds for 80 vouchers. This is obviously a very large gap in a critical housing resource, and filling it will require significant effort by members of the Council. I would like to discuss one means of closing a portion of this gap.

As you know, the Legal Clinic has long had concerns about the District’s Rapid Re-Housing program for homeless families. We continue to work with family after family who have been exited from the program when they stand no chance of retaining their housing. The District’s misguided policy of using Rapid Re-Housing as the primary means of addressing family homelessness has caused widespread



suffering and left many families worse off than they were when they first became homeless. While there is disagreement about how to interpret the data on the program, it is clear that no matter how you cut it most families who exit the program will not be able to retain stable housing without additional assistance.

For the last two budget cycles, the Council has wisely voted to reallocate most new funding for Rapid Re-Housing towards long-term housing resources for families. Despite this, spending on the family Rapid Re-Housing program has ballooned from \$32 million in FY 2017 to \$40.6 million in FY 2019. Perhaps most striking is last year's budget cycle in which the Administration requested an increase of \$6.6 million, only received \$1 million from the Council, but spending on the program still increased by \$6.6 million. It is not clear how this financial feat was accomplished, or how the agency manages to get the budget it wants for the program even when Council disagrees.

We strongly believe that this program does not make sense for most families experiencing homelessness in the District. We therefore submit that the Council should decrease the District's reliance on the program and scale up other programs that better address family homelessness. To that end, earlier today the Legal Clinic, along with Bread for the City, Children's Law Center, DC Law Students in Court and the Legal Aid Society of DC, sent the attached letter to you, Chairperson Nadeau, asking that you:

- 1. Reallocate the \$3 million increase in one-time funds that the Mayor is seeking for Rapid Re-Housing in FY 2020 towards TAH for families in Rapid Re-Housing and shelter.**
- 2. Reallocate an additional \$3.7 million of Rapid Re-Housing funds towards TAH for families in Rapid Re-Housing and shelter.**

These budget shifts would fill 20% of the gap in TAH funding for FY 2020 through just a 9% reduction in spending on Rapid Re-Housing. While this would obviously fall short of the full need for TAH identified by the Fair Budget Coalition, we hope that the Council will be able to identify additional resources to meet that critical need. And since Rapid Re-Housing costs about 30% more than TAH per family per year, these reallocations would result in more families being housed in FY 2020 than would have been under the Mayor's budget proposal.

As the chair of the Council's Committee on Human Services, we ask for your leadership in rightsizing a flawed program and re-investing those resources to provide long-term, stable housing for families experiencing homelessness.

Singles Shelter Redevelopment

Turning to the redevelopment of the singles shelter system, the biggest projects currently under consideration are replacing the Harriet Tubman shelter for women and the 801 East shelter for men. It is no secret that these buildings have been in poor shape for a long time. We strongly support replacing these aging facilities and appreciate the agency's decision to prioritize these projects.

Regarding a new shelter to replace Harriet Tubman, I believe that this year's budget documents were the first we had heard of the Administration's plans, so we look forward to learning more about the project. We certainly support the project in principle but also wish that such decisions could be made more openly.

For an example of why more transparency would be useful, just consider the project to replace 801 East shelter. We strongly support a new shelter to replace 801 East and we support doing it quickly. But as we have previously stated before this Committee, we are very concerned that the District has decided to build the 801 East replacement shelter on a former landfill. That decision carries obvious and substantial risks, and while it is possible that the Administration is taking those risks seriously in private, there has been little to no public indication that that is the case. In fact, the environmental assessments that have been done on the proposed site to date are so inadequate that it is unclear whether that site is viable at all.

As you know, on March 11 an environmental attorney with Winston & Strawn sent a letter to DMPED and DGS on our behalf. The letter outlined the known and unknown risks associated with the decision to site the shelter on a former landfill and requested further action by the Administration to ensure that the redevelopment can be done in a manner that protects the health and safety of current and future 801 East residents. Tomorrow it will have been one month since that letter was sent, but we have yet to get any response from either agency. Given the lack of meaningful evidence that this project can be done safely, we urge this Committee to consider including language in the Budget Support Act that ties funds for the project to – at a minimum – conducting further environmental assessments of the site, remediation of any hazards and installing proper engineering controls.

With more transparency earlier on in the process we could have identified these issues and talked through how to best ensure client safety and meet everyone's goals for the project. Instead, we have to have these discussions at what feels like the last minute and with limited information. Hopefully there is still sufficient time to have an open and honest conversation about the risks associated with this project and how things can move forward in a way that meets our shared goal of building a safe shelter for homeless adults.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.