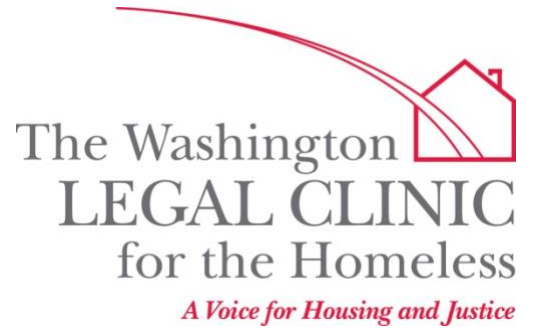


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Good afternoon, Councilmembers. I am Brittany K. Ruffin, Affordable Housing Advocacy Attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Since 1987, the Legal Clinic has envisioned and worked towards a just and inclusive community for all residents 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. Unfortunately, our vision is still that—a vision. Currently, there is no right to housing; and, it is hard for the vast majority of our vulnerable residents to focus on thriving when basic survival in DC has become such a challenge.

In the midst of COVID-19, there has been such an emphasis on what *and who* is considered “essential.” Unfortunately, the application of that term has been too loosely applied, and we have consistently seen a lack of focus on supporting those most essential to DC—the people who live in DC. The current proposed budget continues to sacrifice funding for essential programs and services that DC residents rely on. There is a lack of a substantial and sustained investment in public housing and no LRSP money to pull families from the voucher waitlist of 40,000 households. The budget has an \$11 million cut to homeless services, no significant increase in emergency rental assistance, and an insufficient investment in vouchers to end homelessness. It includes cuts to programs and agencies meant to assist in reentry housing and other necessary services, makes no real effort to create deeply affordable housing, and will significantly increase the harm to those who need these services the most—largely, Black DC residents.

Still, the MPD’s budget is more than half a *billion* dollars. Despite a lack of investment in the human needs of DC’s people, the decision was made to increase MPD operating budget by 3.3% and capital budget by 51.3%—unnecessary and tone-deaf investments that dismiss the reality of the underfunded needs of so many in DC, particularly during a pandemic. MPD’s massive budget is more than those of the major agencies meant to provide and support real human service needs. The District has more officers per capita than anywhere in the nation. Yet, the nearly \$18 million operating budget increase is primarily for increased personnel. The MPD budget has consistently grown, while the budgets of agencies that actually provide life enhancing and essential services to DC residents have been sacrificed.

For the last twenty years, in the interest of our clients and in response to reports of increasing harassment and mistreatment of those experiencing homelessness by MPD officers, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless has facilitated a “Homelessness 101” course for new MPD recruits. While we hope that it has contributed to more positive interactions for our clients and all of those experiencing homelessness on DC’s streets, the fact remains that there are plenty of DC agencies and programs that *should* be interacting with those experiencing street homelessness--MPD is not among them. Funding to those other agencies should mirror that truth. Ultimately, the budget is a collection of choices. No DC residents should have to live on the streets—particularly in a city with a \$16 billion budget.

At a time when this city and nation are at a crucial point of reckoning in addressing white supremacy, police brutality, and the dehumanization of Black bodies and lives, DC must step up to acknowledge, address, and rectify its role in those systems. Despite being 46% of the city's population, DC's Black residents make up the overwhelming majority of those experiencing homelessness, those in public housing, those incarcerated in DC Jail, those policed in their neighborhoods, those who have died from COVID-19, and those who have been displaced from the city. These debilitating statistics are the result of intentional government policies and underinvestment.

This committee and Council *must* reimagine and expand its concept of public safety to include the many agencies, programs, and community resources that serve to support its Black community—the lifeblood of the District. **DC must divest from the MPD and substantially invest in the programs and agencies that positively contribute to and affirm the lives of its people.**

One should look no further than the budget and allocation of precious local funds to determine the priorities of a jurisdiction. Wherever the money is invested, there, too, is the “heart” and intention of this city. This current FY21 budget, including the disproportionate bolstering of funds within MPD, does not reflect well on DC and its claimed priorities. Even more particularly now, amidst the current climate, MPD's most recent disregard for the civil liberties of its residents, the resulting harm to so many, and the increased social service needs in the city, the Council must fully reevaluate the total allocation of budget funds. DC Council must fully assert its role as the true arbiter of DC's priorities. This is a pivotal moment for the Council to curb the influence, harm, and power of the MPD, while more holistically investing in the communities most impacted by the agency.

Fundamentally, creating and preserving affordable housing, ending homelessness, and achieving racial equity throughout the District cannot be consistently touted as D.C. priorities if the budget funding does not reflect that. It needs to be clear that the emphasis in this budget is to sustain and maintain the *lives* of DC residents. This Committee and the Council must step in to assert the critical needs of D.C. residents as *the* priority in this budget.