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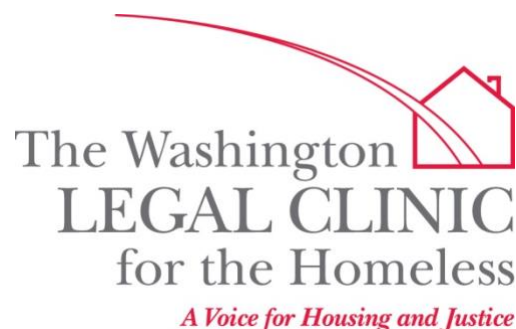
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D.C. Council Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization Budget Oversight Hearing-DCHA

May 28, 2020

Good afternoon, Councilmembers. I am Brittany K. Ruffin, Affordable Housing Advocacy Attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Since 1987, the WLCH 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.

Last year, after no investment from the mayor, advocates and councilmembers worked diligently to make sure that there was money in the final budget for public housing repairs. So, we are pleased that Mayor Bowser decided to reverse course this year and invest in DCHA and public housing over the next two years in the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). Consistently, advocates have echoed the agency's budget request for a recurring \$60 million for a minimum of ten years that will address the substantial preservation, rehabilitation, and redevelopment needs of DC's public housing properties. Currently, the budget allocates \$25 million for public housing repairs in FY21 and \$15 million in FY22. However, it also cuts funding from the FY20 budget and includes no LRSP money to pull families from the HCVP waitlist. While the current allocation of funds is certainly better than last year's \$0, it is still not enough to make the substantial changes necessary for the tenants in DC's only true stock of deeply affordable housing.

A lack of funding means fewer improvements for those who have had to tolerate substandard housing conditions for far too long. Buildings are currently in need of new roofing, bathrooms, kitchens, and furnaces. Entire units are in need of renovation and lead abatements. Too many properties are in need of replacement elevators, piping, generators, and HVAC systems. However, these are not *just* buildings, units, and properties. These are the homes of thousands of DC residents--real families that will have to go longer without better and safer housing because of insufficient funds. We, along with our Fair Budget Coalition partners, urge the Council to find the money to fill these gaps.



COVID-19 has exacerbated existing community needs. Black and indigenous communities have been devastatingly affected by this pandemic. In DC, seventy-five percent (75%) of COVID-19 deaths thus far have been of Black residents. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of those experiencing homelessness in DC are Black—a pre-COVID-19 statistic. More than 20,000 Black residents have been displaced over the last several years. Unfortunately, the effects of COVID-19 and DC’s underinvestment in deeply affordable housing will undoubtedly further these unacceptable trends. The public housing population is nearly all Black, and over half are seniors and/or those with disabilities. DC’s public housing crisis has been a public health emergency for decades. All people deserve to have housing without mold, lead, and deteriorated conditions. Now, when people must stay in their homes more than ever before, the need for safe housing is even more critical. This is certainly not the time for DC to deprioritize funding the needs of its most vulnerable residents. DC’s budget must prioritize investments in the programs and agencies that are serving actual human survival needs.

Along with a more substantial financial investment in public housing repairs and housing homeless DC residents, we hope that the Council will strongly support the *Public Housing Preservation and Tenant Protection Amendment Act of 2020* and include its language in the BSA. That legislation will memorialize DCHA’s stated commitment to its residents, ensuring that public housing residents can rightfully access the housing that is intended for them upon any property redevelopment or transformation. This Committee and DC Council must utilize its oversight abilities to do everything within its power to protect the District’s residents and their access to housing.

Unfortunately, in the midst of COVID-19 and the focus on “essential services”, the current proposed budget sacrifices 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 services, makes no real effort to create deeply affordable housing, and will increase the harm to those who need services the most.

Meanwhile, despite these essential service and program cuts, the budget managed to keep \$230 million in the CIP to fund the DC Streetcar and complete the K Street transit. Though the MPD’s budget is already more than half a billion dollars, the mayor still decided to increase its 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.

The mayor has also proposed a tax abatement program for the creation of some affordable units in desirable areas of the city at 80%AMI or less. However, we know that the “or less” is almost never a consideration. Everyone wants to see more housing created in DC, but people are tired of hearing about “affordable housing” creation in this city that is only targeted at 80%AMI households. It is simply disingenuous for this administration and Council to continuously act as though households making approximately \$100,000/yr need more assistance to remain in DC than those making one-third (1/3) of that. The data is clear that not prioritizing deeply affordable housing creation will mean further displacement for Black DC residents. Ultimately, a strong message is being sent regarding what and *whom* DC government cares about.

Fundamentally, creating and preserving affordable housing, ending homelessness, and achieving racial equity 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.