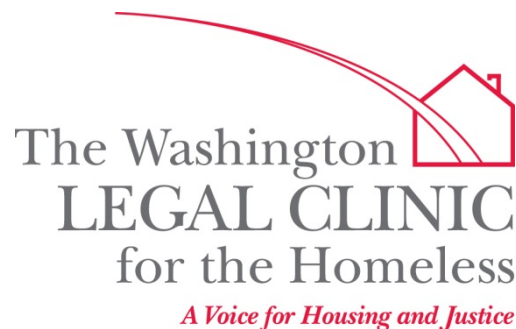


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D.C. Council Committee on Housing and Executive Administration Budget Oversight Hearing-
DCHA -June 16, 2021

Testimony of Brittany K. Ruffin, Affordable Housing Advocacy Attorney, The Washington Legal
Clinic for the Homeless

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, it is difficult for the vast majority of DC's vulnerable residents to focus on thriving when basic survival has become such a challenge.

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 \$22 million for public housing repairs in FY22, \$20 million in FY23, and \$15 million in FY24. We are pleased that Mayor Bowser decided to, again, invest in DCHA and public housing over the next few years. However, those yearly investments fall short of the \$60 million in recurring funds that is needed. The Mayor also decided to attempt to earmark the only public housing repair investments over the next few years to one property, Claridge Towers. Claridge Towers is, unfortunately, one of several DCHA properties in need of substantial repairs and renovations. If the only repair funds for the next three years are allocated to one property, it means no relief for the thousands of other DCHA residents who are also living in deplorable conditions. Simply, the current allocation and distribution is 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. The public housing population is nearly all Black, and over half are seniors and/or those with disabilities. Buildings are currently in need of new roofing, bathrooms, kitchens, and furnaces. Entire units need renovation and lead abatements. Too many properties require 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 have no choice in continuing to live in unsafe conditions. We, along with our Fair Budget Coalition partners, urge the Council to find the money to fill these gaps.



The Mayor's intention to make an investment to DCHA and earmark the funds for specific use highlights a concerning pattern of increased mayoral attempts to control DCHA. Surely, DCHA, the owner of the existing public housing properties, is in the best position to evaluate the needs of its properties and utilize the repair funds most appropriately. Similarly, we have serious concerns with the Mayor's intention to change the funding administration structure of LRSP in the Budget Support Act, particularly as it pertains to tenant-based vouchers. DCHA administers and completes the process for tenant-based voucher lease-ups. In the newly proposed Budget Support Act language, the Mayor attempts an unreasonable move of the tenant-based LRSP funding to DHS.

There has already been an acknowledgment that streamlining issues between DCHA and DHS that have led to delays within the lease-up process. The agencies have been working on improving platforms and communications to ensure that they are minimizing additional barriers. An attempt to remove the tenant-based LRSP funding from DCHA, give it to DHS, and require DCHA to request it from DHS in order to complete its lease-up process would only increase delay and inefficiency for waiting residents. Such a significant change in the BSA only serves the Administration's oversight desires; it does not serve DC residents. Council must examine this and all LRSP BSA language changes, including the impact of creating a new capital gap financing allowance and changing tenant-based voucher eligibility. We also urge an overall examination of mayoral influence on DCHA, particularly within the structure of the DCHA Board of Commissioners. The Council must not allow this or *any* mayor's administration to exert undue power and control over DCHA's operational or redevelopment decisions. The Council must exercise its own independent oversight obligations of DCHA, refusing to cede that duty to the Mayor.

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. However, for another year, the Mayor made no investment in tenant-based LRSP funds to pull families from the voucher waitlist of over 40,000 households. Extremely low-income residents need subsidies to be able to live in DC. There has been an effort by the Mayor and Council to fund PSH, which is certainly needed. However, the lack of funding for tenant-based vouchers that are not attached to services is problematic and perpetuates an ideology that pathologizes poverty while dismissing the real challenges and inequities of systemic racism and capitalism. People need subsidized housing because housing for them without it cannot happen. Every person in need of stable permanent housing does not need intensive services. However, those individuals are also deserving of housing. 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.

In order to protect the lowest-income DC residents, DCHA must assert its own interest and mission as supreme: preserving and creating housing for the residents earning the least in the District. DCHA is one of the largest landowners in D.C. It is also the largest source of DC's large-family and accessible units. DCHA cannot allow its properties to become subject to the will of developers whose sole purpose in this city is to garner exorbitant profits.

Currently, ninety-five percent of the residents in DCHA properties are within the 0-30 percent AMI range. The overwhelming majority of DC's rent-burdened residents, 77 percent, fall within this range. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute issued a report indicating that 27,000 new units of affordable housing are needed to house DC's residents living within the 0-30 percent AMI level. Unsurprisingly, Black and brown residents account for nine out of ten of those extremely low-income households. A decrease in public housing units would further exacerbate Black displacement and racial inequity in the city. There must remain an overarching commitment to families struggling the most to live in DC and a guarantee of 0-30% AMI affordability in the buildings/units on its current properties and in all future redevelopment deals.

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 Council must utilize its oversight abilities to do everything within its power to protect the District's residents and their access to housing, asserting the critical needs of D.C. residents as *the* priority in this budget. Fundamentally, creating and preserving deeply affordable housing, ending homelessness, and achieving racial equity cannot be consistently touted as D.C. priorities if the budget funding does not reflect that.