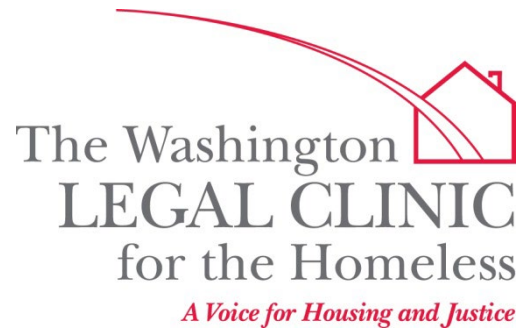


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D.C. Council Committee on Housing and Executive Administration-Green New Deal for Housing
Act Hearing-November 22, 2022

Testimony of Brittany K. Ruffin, Director of Policy and Advocacy, and Brittany Dillman, Legal Intern, The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

Good afternoon, Councilmembers. 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 hard for the vast majority of our vulnerable residents to focus on thriving when basic survival in DC has become such a challenge.

The District of Columbia continues to have an affordable housing crisis that threatens thousands of its residents. In particular, there is a lack of deeply affordable housing in DC—the category that is most needed. Despite this fact, deeply affordable housing for those at 0-30% AMI continues to be the most underproduced in DC.

Social housing has been a successful model for expanding affordability and access to housing in other countries, and the prospect of it being a DC investment is exciting. We are extremely pleased to see DC Council’s interest in an additional tool to combat the lack of affordable housing. While the proposed Green New Deal for Housing Act sets up a framework for a promising new way to create housing in DC, more detailed consideration into the implementation of the plan is necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Legislation needs to be explicit in detailing how this venture will benefit DC residents in a way that is different from already existing mixed-income housing efforts that under prioritize those who most need it. Social housing is an opportunity to do things better and offer true affordable housing access and protections.

Since the purpose is to expand affordable housing, that commitment has to be clear in the language within the legislation. If the unit income breakdown within the building is to be one-third for extremely low income and one-third for very low income, current language used-- “to the greatest extent possible” and “to the extent practicable”-- should be removed so that there are no loopholes that could minimize affordability and make these buildings more of the status quo in DC.

This bill creates a new mayoral agency, The Office of Social Housing, but gives little instruction as to how the agency must operate. More consideration and explanation should be provided as to the role of this agency, how it would provide a substantially different purpose than DHCD, and what provisions can guarantee that this office would operate better and more efficiently than other DC agencies.

This legislation should be an opportunity to create more affordable housing while minimizing barriers to housing access. Eligibility details and an attempt for more equitable screening processes should be required and explicit, particularly if contracting for property management is contemplated. If private management companies are allowed to dictate access to these government funded resources, these buildings will be no different from current private-public partnerships that harm residents through restrictive and often discriminatory screening. There should be more contemplation around the intersection of the private management/development role of the model and DC government's role, in general, and Council should look to the guidance of other jurisdictions as to the standards and guarantees therein if private management/contracting is utilized.

While there is a general commitment to one-third of units being reserved for extremely low-income residents, that access should not only be for those who already have housing subsidies. If access to these buildings is contingent upon most applicants already having a voucher or being able to afford market rent, then the buildings will be just more of the currently existing mixed-income model. Also, setting fixed rents, even within each income bracket, would serve to exclude many residents who could benefit from these new housing opportunities. Rents in the building, for low-income residents, should actually be based on what individual households can afford.

In terms of funding, the bill states that the Housing Production Trust Fund will be used to develop Social Housing units. As Council is aware, the HPTF has consistently been underspent on creation of extremely low-income units/projects. While social housing could be a way to efficiently use more HPTF money as intended, full consideration of the impact on the fund and other projects must also be examined. Additional funding resources, including taxes, used in other countries and jurisdictions should also be explored. Incentives and requirements for the use of DOPA, a rarely used DC tool, must also be further explored.

Tenant board decision-making and autonomy is an important piece of the legislation. More consideration and input from current DC residents in tenant councils and boards would be beneficial in striking a balance between what tenants want to be responsible for within their buildings and what they do not, avoiding burdensome expectations and responsibilities placed on tenants.

WLCH applauds Councilmember Lewis George's efforts to do something to address DC's affordability crisis by proposing a social housing model. We certainly hope to see a better system of tools for affordable housing creation in DC than currently exists. To achieve that, however, we strongly recommend comprehensive conversations with current affordable housing tenants, experts, and advocates before a second iteration of this legislation is drafted and moved forward. We would like to see expanded access to deeply affordable housing

through a social housing model that is *truly* revolutionary, fully contemplates existing issues with low-income housing availability in DC, and offers real solutions through thoughtful implementation and input. We look forward to working with councilmembers in the efforts to strengthen and improve this legislation so that social housing can be the tool for affordable housing creation and access that DC residents deserve.