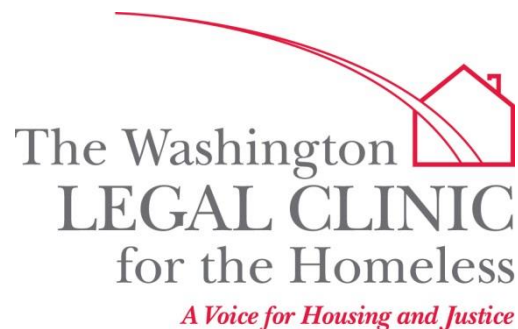


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D.C. Council Committee on Housing- DCHA Oversight Hearing -March 2, 2023

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

Good afternoon, Councilmembers. I am Brittany K. Ruffin, Director of Policy and Advocacy 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.

As plans have arisen over the last few years to significantly transform DC's public housing stock, advocates and tenants have stressed the need for DCHA to stand firm on its mission—housing for DC's lowest income residents. With disjointed development plans and a revolving door of scandal and staff, DCHA has done little to inspire confidence over the past few years. Unfortunately, current tenants and future residents in need of deeply affordable housing are the ones who suffer from the agency's constant state of development confusion, displacement, and internal disarray. DCHA is the largest landowner in D.C. It is also the largest source of DC's large-family and accessible units. Public housing in DC is the only true deeply affordable housing in the city—the only housing that remains solely for the demographic of residents that cannot live in DC otherwise.

There are thousands of people currently living in public housing. Seniors and residents with disabilities represent fifty-five (55%) percent of all heads of household in DC's public housing. More than one-third of households are families with children. Currently, ninety-five (95%) percent of the residents in DCHA properties are within the 0-30 percent AMI range—extremely low income. Ninety-one (91%) percent of DC's public housing residents are also Black.

Affordable housing is too crucial a need in DC for this committee & Council not to treat its oversight responsibility of DCHA with the seriousness and urgency that is required. The scathing [HUD Assessment Report](#) issued last September details a multitude of agency and Board failures that DCHA residents have long known. Embarrassment and valid criticism led to an urgent desire of DCHA and the mayor to remove all non-mayoral controlled commissioner seats. In fact, the Board member seats removed from the Board of Commissioners through the emergency legislation were held by the only members that consistently raised many of the issues cited within the HUD Report. Undoubtedly, the removal of critical Board seats and a shift to increased mayoral control and influence without internal critical inquiry will continue to be devastating for residents and the preservation of public housing in DC.

We were disappointed to see Council support for the mayor's emergency legislation. Now that the newly structured Board is in place, we hope to see greater accountability and oversight of DCHA by Council. What DCHA and its Board of Commissioners lack in consistency and commitment to the agency's stated mission, this committee must ensure through its oversight capabilities. This Council, through its oversight, must assert DCHA's mission as supreme: preserving and creating housing for the residents earning the least in DC.

WLCH has a unique position of advocating for current and future residents of public housing. Approximately nineteen percent of D.C.'s population is living in poverty, much higher than the national average. With thousands of families on the waitlist for public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher Program in DC, the need for DCHA to make sure that any and all future development deals prioritize DC's lowest income residents (DCHA's primary demographic) is crucial.

Despite the deeply affordable housing needs in DC and the fact that a decrease in public housing units would further exacerbate Black displacement and racial inequity in the city, there has been a tendency to focus on public housing redevelopment that does not prioritize the actual housing needs of those who need it the most, now or in the future. Due to clear conflicts of interest in overall goals, DCHA cannot simply operate as an arm of DMPED or the vehicle for the mayor's overall city development plans. DCHA and this Council cannot allow its properties to become subject to the will of developers whose sole purpose in this city is to garner exorbitant profits.

In an attempt to appear to progress towards HUD compliance, DCHA recently released approximately one-thousand pages of proposed substantive regulation changes to its fundamental program operations. These fundamental changes will significantly impact current and future DCHA public housing residents and HCVP voucher participants. Eligibility requirements, waitlist maintenance, and rent reasonableness are only a few of the major areas addressed within the newly proposed administrative plans. We await further discourse and transparency around the proposed changes so that residents, advocates, and this Committee can appropriately respond and evaluate the harm and/or benefit to DCHA's residents and program participants. We look forward to conversation with the agency and continue to encourage the agency to work with residents and advocates on policy change suggestions *before*, and not after, issuing proposals.

Council should implore DCHA to increase transparency and ease communication access for the residents & community members it serves. We also suggest that the agency improve tech capabilities and increase access to staff in order to better streamline the voucher process and get DC residents housed more efficiently, increasing transparency and accountability.

We continue to urge the Council to strongly support and pass the protections originally introduced in the *Public Housing Preservation and Tenant Protection Amendment Act of 2020* and memorialize the right to return, a principle that DCHA administrations have publicly supported without any action to formalize. That legislation would 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.

Finally, we implore this Committee to continue to work on previously introduced legislation to restructure DCHA's future Board of Commissioners in a manner that actually prioritizes DCHA's true mission to serve current and future low-income residents.

This Committee and Council must utilize its oversight abilities to do everything within its power to protect the District's lowest-income residents and their access to housing in DC. This Committee cannot watch idly as DCHA's dysfunction threatens DC's precious public housing resources. Council must maintain an overarching commitment to the residents relying on DCHA and DC's valuable housing resources.