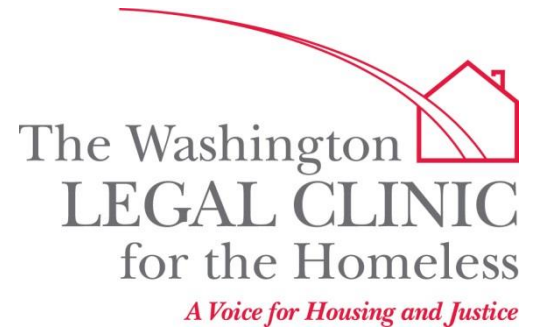


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D.C. Council Committee on Housing- DCHA Budget Oversight Hearing- April 10, 2023

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

For the last few years, tenants and advocates have requested at least a recurring \$60 million for a minimum of ten years that will address the substantial preservation, rehabilitation, and redevelopment needs of D.C.'s public housing properties. Due to zealous community advocacy and Council's commitment, DCHA has received \$50 million in the budget for the last few years for repairs. For the last couple of years, the mayor has even added it in her budget before Council intervention. The amount has not yet reached the requested \$60 million that has been identified as the necessary annual investment, but at least something is there now as a standard. The central task for Council now is to ensure that the significant repair and maintenance needs are *actually* being addressed with those funds and that residents feel that investment.

We are extremely disappointed to see no new funding for vouchers in the mayor's budget for FY24—none to fund DHS programs or to pull residents off of the existing waitlist. Generally, year after year, the lack of funding for tenant-based vouchers that are unattached to services continues to disappoint, perpetuating an ideology that pathologizes poverty while dismissing the challenges and inequities of systemic racism, capitalism, and income inequality. Each year, D.C. simply becomes more unaffordable, particularly for low-income families. There remains a crucial need for investment into LRSP tenant vouchers so that families on DCHA's waitlist and vulnerable communities have an opportunity to secure safe and permanent housing. We join the FBC's requests for a \$17.33 million investment to

pull 800 families from the waitlist and \$1.3 million for an increase in voucher allocations to support the housing needs of returning citizens. The fact that DHS and DCHA have continued to have streamlining issues and failed to get resources out quickly should not be the burden of residents waiting for housing. Residents should not continue to be punished for agency implementation failures. D.C.'s budget continues to grow, but the lowest income residents continue to have to fight for basic resources.

DCHA is the largest landowner in D.C. It is also the largest source of D.C.'s large-family and accessible units. The public housing population is nearly all Black, and over half are seniors and/or those with disabilities. Currently, ninety-five (95%) percent of the residents in DCHA properties are within the 0-30 percent AMI range. Public housing in D.C. 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 D.C. otherwise. These facts should be the foundation for any future plans and/or updates to public housing properties and public housing policies.

In an attempt to address HUD Report criticism, DCHA recently released more than one-thousand pages of proposed substantive policy 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. WLCH, along with several colleague organizations, have submitted joint comments to address our major concerns with the policies and process.

It is important to note that while these proposals are broadly referred to as new regulations, they are, in fact, broad policy recommendations produced by a third-party contractor. They were not released in DCMR regulation form and fail to even expand upon or include language that would instruct DCHA's own employees on how to implement the proposed policies. These should not be accepted as standard regulations.

We can appreciate Director Donald's desire to want to urgently address HUD concerns and make some sort of progress before her departure. However, agency failures over decades have led to the agency's current circumstances. The goal should not simply be to "check boxes" and *appear* to make theoretical progress. Swift implementation of a third-party contractor's policy recommendations is not going to fix the issues that residents deal with daily; however, it can certainly make things much worse. Generally, DCHA cannot adequately and appropriately implement its *current* program policies, as is evident by all of the testimony the Committee has heard. Believing that an urgent implementation of poorly conceived program policy will improve things for residents while the current lack of institutional/housing program knowledge and core agency incompetency continue to exist defies logic. DCHA aims to raise the stakes for residents and applicants with dire consequences but does not intend to hold itself accountable by addressing its institutional, training, and staffing failures. DCHA must address and demonstrate its ability to implement policies before it proposes to overhaul current regulations and replace them with new

ones. Policies that make DCHA programs more burdensome and less accessible for D.C. residents should not be the focus or goal of DCHA.

Deeply affordable housing is too crucial a need in D.C. for this committee and Council not to treat its oversight responsibility of DCHA with the seriousness and urgency that is required. What DCHA and its BOC 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 primary: preserving and creating housing for the residents earning the least in the District.

Finally, we continue to urge the Council to strongly support the protections originally introduced in the *Public Housing Preservation and Tenant Protection Amendment Act of 2020* and memorialize the right to return in the Budget Support Act, a principle that DCHA administrations have publicly supported without formalizing. The 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.

This Committee and Council must utilize its oversight abilities to do everything within its power to protect the District's lowest-income residents and fund their access to housing in D.C. Council must maintain an overarching commitment to the people struggling the most to live in D.C., asserting the critical needs of D.C. residents in D.C.'s 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.