

D.C. Council Committee on Housing- DHS Budget Oversight Hearing- April 5, 2024

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Since 1987, the Legal Clinic has 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 have equal access to the resources that they need to thrive.

Every year, D.C. becomes more unaffordable, driving out the less affluent and D.C. residents of color. Policymakers have long been dedicated to these residents in their rhetoric, but words need to be supported by concrete action. The time is now for Council to invest in permanent housing vouchers, reform Rapid Re-housing, increase rental assistance, and enhance and improve the current and future shelter system. The Mayor claims that this budget requires sacrifice, but D.C. must consider who can afford to bear this burden.

I. Ending Homelessness

To end homelessness and combat the lack of affordable housing in the city, there is an immense need for D.C. to fund and utilize all of the different types of vouchers at their disposal. The Mayor's FY25 budget is woefully insufficient and adds no new vouchers. The administration's practice of underfunding DHS and utilizing funding for other things has contributed to a massive reduction in housing resources for residents that desperately need them. Vouchers are the most effective means of ending homelessness in D.C., but the lack of funding for FY25 indicates that ending homelessness is not a mayoral priority. Point-in-time data indicates that homelessness in D.C. has increased by twelve percent (12%). Unfortunately, even that number severely undercounts how many residents are actually experiencing homelessness in D.C.

We and our coalition partners request the FY25 budget meet the housing needs of D.C. residents by funding enough vouchers to permanently house approximately 5,000 households. Specifically, we are asking for the following:

Program	Households	Cost
Permanent Supportive Housing-families	580	Estimated \$22.8M
Targeted Affordable Housing	2326	Estimated \$70.75M
LRSP Tenant Vouchers	800	Estimated \$17.33M
PSH-individuals	1260	Estimated \$36.6M
LRSP vouchers for returning citizens	60	Estimated \$1.3M
Outreach	--	\$5M
Total	5026	\$153.78M

Without Council’s intervention in FY24, there would not have been a single new voucher for D.C. residents. Council must step in again to ensure D.C. residents do not lack new resources in FY25. Council must also increase oversight of DHS and DCHA to promote more efficient voucher administration, utilization, and staffing.

II. Rapid Re-housing Reform

Rapid Re-housing (RRH) was supposed to be a bridge to financial stability. In practice, it has exacerbated housing insecurity through poor program administration. As a result, RRH results in ninety-seven (97%) percent of its participants being unable to afford rent when they exit the program. Last year, when DHS aimed to terminate hundreds of families, Council passed legislation to prevent mass displacement. However, two weeks ago, DHS published new FRSP regulations that threaten every participant family with swift termination and collateral consequences. D.C. Council should disapprove the newly proposed and emergency regulations. The mayor has also proposed an extremely harmful BSA subtitle that further restricts access and appeal rights. This Committee must remove this BSA subtitle.

It is time for Council to remedy these issues by passing the Rapid Re-housing Reform Amendment Act. RRH families, more than sixty-five (65) other organizations, and 400 individuals have advocated for this legislation for years and Council has shown support for it. Among other things, this legislation prohibits terminations based on reaching arbitrary time limits if the family cannot afford market rent on their own, ensures participants only pay thirty percent (30%) of their income in rent, and makes case management truly optional.

The fiscal impact has yet to be determined, as DHS has resisted providing RRH program data and costs for a fiscal impact statement (FIS). DHS cites budgetary constraints as their reason for not being able to maintain the households already placed in Rapid Rehousing, but continues to offer Rapid Rehousing to new families. DHS has announced its plan to terminate 2,000 families from the program in this fiscal year, but DHS has no concrete plan to ensure that these families do not return to homelessness once exited. In fact, RRH participants have already begun

receiving exit notices. Council must hold DHS accountable for the program failures and stop plans for the mass displacement of RRH families.

III. Shelter System Reform

Most of D.C.'s shelter system is congregate. Thus, it is incumbent upon Council to make these sites accessible and safe. Often, when looking for emergency shelter, families trek to Virginia Williams for shelter. In many cases, families are arbitrarily denied and many of these families turn to places like The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless for assistance. To obtain emergency shelter, families must endure a burdensome process and are often deemed ineligible for unjustified and unlawful reasons. Council should mandate more DHS staff training and amend the HSRA to mandate low-barrier shelter access.

DHS has announced a plan for relocation for the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. It is unclear how services will be affected by VWFRC's pending relocation or closing. This Committee must urge transparency and a plan from DHS on exactly how services will continue if Virginia Williams relocates.

We are pleased that twenty-four-hour singles shelter access has been maintained in the budget, but funding must be increased so that the same access is extended to those in Office of Migrant Services (OMS) shelters. Additionally, D.C. Council must ensure that DHS' plan to reduce OMS shelter sites does not further frustrate and eliminate services for those who desperately need them.

IV. Non-Congregate Shelter Expansion & Storage Funding

The Pandemic Emergency Program for Medically Vulnerable Individuals (PEP-V), though flawed, demonstrated the importance and utility of non-congregate shelters. Currently, D.C.'s singles shelter system is completely comprised of congregate spaces. We were pleased to see that the Mayor funded the \$13M needed to operate the two planned non-congregate shelters. We hope that Council affirms this funding, ensures the new shelters are HSRA compliant, and contemplates future funding that will further increase non-congregate spaces.

Additionally, we urge Council to dedicate \$1.5M for secure, storage sites. Residents experiencing homelessness should not have to choose between their belongings or shelter. The proposed FY25 budget includes funds for additional shelter construction, including \$64M for the Federal City Shelter near CCNV, a mixed-use shelter with congregate shelter and permanent supportive housing. We support investments in shelter updates in D.C.; however, we await additional information and concrete plans regarding shelter operations, logistics, and funding.

V. ERAP

The Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) helps D.C. residents maintain housing and avoid eviction. Unfortunately, due to inadequate funding and accessibility issues, ERAP is unavailable to many who need it. The Mayor has reduced ERAP by more than fifty percent from the level Council funded in FY24, despite rental costs and homelessness in D.C. continuing to

climb. We ask that Council increase ERAP to at least \$100M and improve the application process to ensure that it is accessible and legally compliant. We also ask Council to increase oversight to require regular reporting on ERAP administration and distribution, including timelines, staffing, and delays of administering organizations.

VI. Conclusion

D.C's lowest-income residents have always been told that they must sacrifice. A deep well of resentment and distrust comes from knowing that some will be extended a life raft as many others are left to drown in neglect. This budget is tight and sacrifices must be made. We only ask that this Council not place the lion's share of that sacrifice on the shoulders of those struggling the most to survive.