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Committee of the Whole  
FY25 Budget Support Act and Local Budget Act  
May 3, 2024

My name is Amber W. Harding and I am the Executive Director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. Since 1987, the Legal Clinic has envisioned and worked towards a just and inclusive community for all D.C. residents, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive. My colleague, Brit Ruffin, will speak to our overarching budget and policy recommendations for FY25. My testimony will focus on the impending mass displacement of 2000 families from rapid re-housing.

One of our clients said I could share their story, but not use their name because they fear retaliation. They have been in rapid rehousing for several years. In that time, they have spoken with a caseworker only a handful of times. When they entered the program, they were asked what their goals were. They said: 1) help getting permanent housing they could afford; 2) help getting a high school diploma; and 3) help getting a job. They got zero help achieving any of these goals. As far as they know they have never been assessed for Permanent Supportive Housing or Targeted Affordable Housing, although they are eligible for both. No referrals to GED programs or job leads. Their child is finally stable and thriving in middle school, seeing their grades improve. They are in a safe neighborhood where they feel comfortable going outside. The parent said: “I don’t want that taken from us. They do not care about us or our kids. They gave me false hope. They promised they would help me with housing. They said I had nothing to worry about.”

Mayor Bowser’s mass displacement of families was entirely foreseeable *and* preventable. When the pandemic hit, the Bowser administration rightly put a pause on rapid re-housing exits. When the public health emergency ended, they proposed terminating almost 1000 families in 2022 to “right-size” the program. But those families were still struggling, and the gap between income and rent had only widened for most low-income families during the pandemic. We, along with many partners and allies, advocated for families to exit the program only when they could afford market rent or had been transitioned to a more appropriate housing program.<sup>1</sup> As you said, Chairman Mendelson, when you introduced the bill to reform rapid rehousing in response: “The goal with our homeless services is that we either get people placed into subsidized housing or we get them back on their feet. But not that we perpetuate a cycle of homelessness. And rapid rehousing, basically as it’s been used, is part of the cycle.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legalclinic.org/over-50-organizations-and-experts-demand-that-the-dc-council-reform-rapid-re-housing>

<sup>2</sup> “D.C. Council Chairman Introduces a Bill to Reform a Heavily Criticized Housing Subsidy Program,” Amanda Michelle Gomez, DCist, July 5, 2022, <https://dcist.com/story/22/07/05/dc-mendelson-rapid-rehousing-reform/>.

The mayor had a choice when faced with the growing numbers of families in rapid rehousing. She could have admitted what we all know—that the gap between people’s income and market rent is just too high to bridge with a time-limited program in D.C. She could have invested more in permanent housing subsidies and transitioned the majority of families out of rapid rehousing into long-term assistance, bringing the numbers of families in rapid rehousing down. She could have been more strategic about which families are placed in the program to begin with, which would increase the rates of success in the program, albeit for a very small number of families.

But she didn’t choose to manage the growth of rapid rehousing in a responsible or humane way. She continued to add hundreds of families a year into the program, ballooning its cost while failing to fund any real off-ramp. Then she chose the most harmful way to “right-size” the program that she could—a strict 12-month time limit with no possible extensions for any reason at all. 2000 families thrown into chaos over three months. 2000 families unable to pay their rent. 2000 families unable to access eviction prevention funds that she refuses to believe anyone needs, even as she actively drives the need up to a historic level. 2000 families evicted, many forced to return to shelter, but also to abusers, to abandoned buildings, to tents--- because D.C. doesn’t have even 200 open shelter beds for families. 2000 families who will see their kids suffer, their grades and attendance in school decline, their mental and physical health worsen. For those who make it into shelter, they will be placed back in rapid re-housing, and the cycle will repeat.

All of that is just this year’s round of exits. There is no end in sight for the cruelty of this program. Rapid rehousing is the most expensive, most harmful, and worst performing housing program in the District. Next year will bring more exits, unless you intervene, because the only plan the mayor has to stay within the budget for rapid rehousing is to terminate terminate terminate.

D.C. residents can’t wait anymore for reform. We ask the Council to:

- 1) Demand, and legislate, that the mayor immediately withdraw all time-limit termination notices that have been issued by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and not issue any more terminations for time limits unless the participant can afford market rent. (This ask includes disapproving the program’s emergency regulations<sup>3</sup> as well as striking the mayor’s proposed Budget Support Act subtitle that deprives participants of due process.);
- 2) Increase funding for permanent affordable housing vouchers for families in next year’s budget so that rapid re-housing participants can transition into a program that better maintains housing stability, including Permanent Supportive Housing, Targeted Affordable Housing, and Local Rent Supplement Program tenant vouchers; and
- 3) Pass and fund the *Rapid Rehousing Reform Amendment Act* to fix this deeply flawed time-limited program, once and for all.

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<sup>3</sup> Comments on the regulations submitted by the Legal Clinic, Legal Aid DC, and Children’s Law Center can be found here: <https://www.legalclinic.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Comments-on-Proposed-Rulemaking-to-Amend-FRSP-Regulations-Submitted-04.21.2024.pdf>.