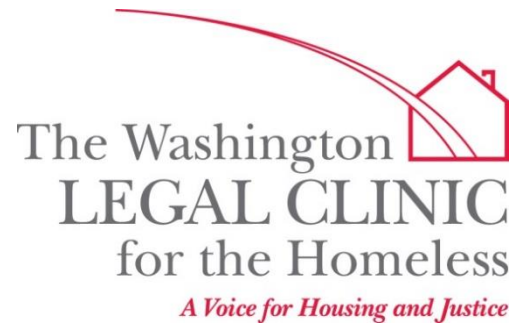


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D.C. Council Committee on Housing- DHS Budget Oversight Hearing- May 29, 2025
Testimony of Joshua M. Drumming, Policy and Advocacy Attorney, and Brittany K. Ruffin, Legal Director, Systemic Advocacy and Litigation, The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

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.

D.C.'s rise in unaffordability is an annual occurrence but this year has seen D.C.'s economic standing shaken by outside factors. We are in a crisis and what D.C. Council does in this budget will determine whether D.C. residents are able to survive it. This budget will serve as a lifeboat for those that need one or a weapon that further displaces D.C. residents of color. The time is now for D.C. Council to invest in permanent housing vouchers, reform Rapid Re-Housing, reject the HSRA BSA subtitle, increase rental assistance, and enhance and improve the current and future shelter system.

I. Ending Homelessness

The local and national economies are in dire straits and D.C. residents need District intervention to weather existent and future economic storms. Many that are housed today lie on the precipice of homelessness. To end homelessness and combat the lack of affordable housing, D.C. must fund and utilize all of the diverse types of vouchers available. This budget adds very few vouchers despite vouchers being among the most effective means of ending homelessness. The administration's practice of underfunding

DHS and utilizing funding for other things has led to a massive reduction in housing resources for residents that desperately need them. D.C. Council must ensure that DHS and DCHA have the requisite staffing and coordination for participants to be quickly identified and approved for permanent housing resources and to swiftly lease up

Last year, Point-in-Time data showed a fourteen percent (14%) increase in homelessness and a thirty-nine (39%) percent increase in family homelessness, D.C. evictions reached a ten-year high, ERAP funding saw a forty (40%) percent drop, and hundreds of families were purged from Rapid Re-Housing. Despite these facts, the 2025 PIT numbers show a curious decrease in homelessness. Advocates have questions and concerns about how data is gathered, omitted, and interpreted to reach such a conclusion. A lack of investment in housing resources will not lead to a decrease in homelessness.

After a few years of no voucher investment by the mayor, we appreciate that the mayor's FY26 budget includes some voucher investment. However, we know that D.C. needs a greater number and diversity of vouchers to successfully meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness. D.C. Council must commit to funding more than the 156 PSH vouchers for D.C.'s unhoused community. Last budget season, in an effort to minimize the harm caused by DHS and stop homelessness for participants, D.C. Council funded 325 Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) vouchers, but a lack of budget transparency from DHS reduced this number to only thirty-eight (38). That cannot happen again. Additionally, PSH is a necessary, but high-barrier program. If the 156 vouchers are exclusively earmarked for those being exited from FRSP, some of those may need to be converted to other vouchers to be accessible to current FRSP families. The Mayor's allocation of D.C. Flex for RRH families should also be converted to permanent vouchers because D.C. Flex will not maintain housing for families that do not have substantial income.

We, along with our coalition partners, request the FY26 budget meet the full housing needs of D.C. residents by funding enough vouchers to permanently house approximately 6,000 households. Specifically, we are asking for the following:

| Program | Households | Cost |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Permanent Supportive Housing-Families | 764 | Approximately \$30.03M |
| Targeted Affordable Housing | 3,058 | Approximately \$93.01M |
| LRSP Tenant Vouchers | 800 | Approximately \$17.33M |
| PSH-Individuals | 1,260 (for 3 consecutive years) | Approximately \$36.6M |
| LRSP Vouchers for Returning Citizens | 60 | Approximately \$1.3M |
| Outreach | ----- | Approximately \$6.4M |
| Total | 5,942 | Approximately \$184.67M |

We ask that D.C. Council increase oversight of DHS and DCHA to promote more efficient voucher administration and to reduce bureaucracy that prolongs homelessness due to delays in distributing and utilizing vouchers. D.C. Council must also increase funding for all permanent voucher programs and increase investment in homelessness outreach services.

II. Rapid Re-Housing Program Reform

The Rapid Re-Housing Program (RRH) has exacerbated housing insecurity through poor program administration. Ninety-seven (97%) percent of its participants are unable to afford rent upon program exit and it has failed to reliably evaluate participants for permanent programs in which to transfer. Data shows that eighteen (18%) percent of new family shelter entries came from Rapid Re-Housing. Without any targeted educational/job training or job placement, families in Rapid Re-Housing only saw a fourteen percent increase in their incomes over the course of their time in the program and individuals in Rapid Re-Housing actually saw their incomes fall by ten percent while in the program. Neither group can afford market rent at the conclusion of their participation. The Mayor's budget guts the Rapid Re-Housing program and does nothing to offset the damage. This will increase D.C. homelessness.

Last year, DHS began terminating 3,000 families for reaching an arbitrary twelve-month time limit. Hundreds have lost their subsidy and even more would have, but for the roughly 2,000 families that have appealed their termination. Beyond that, D.C. Council passed a Budget Support Act that included a subtitle that eviscerated the rights of Rapid Re-Housing participants, carving away the only thing separating many families from homelessness. Now, the Mayor has attempted to make more harmful and confusing changes to Rapid Re-Housing and the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA) in her proposed Budget Support Act that are not germane to the budget. D.C. Council must remove that subtitle from Budget Support Act.

It is time for D.C. Council to fix the Rapid Re-Housing Program by holding a hearing and passing the recently reintroduced Rapid Re-Housing Reform Amendment Act of 2025. This act is the culmination of years of advocacy from RRH families, D.C. organizations, and individuals, and previously supported by D.C. Council. 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 (30%)

percent of their income in rent, requires evaluation for permanent housing resources, 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 Re-Housing but continues to offer Rapid Re-Housing to new families. We ask that D.C. Council ensure that allocated vouchers are accessible to FRSP families, do more to mitigate unnecessary terminations, require accurate and transparent RRH program data and costs from DHS, restore due process rights of participants, and pass and fund the Rapid Re-Housing Reform Amendment Act.

III. Shelter System Reform

DHS relocated the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (VWFRC) to 64 New York Avenue. Even before the move and despite the Legal Clinic's intervention, VWFRC denied over seventy-five (75%) percent of the families that sought shelter in FY24. This is an astronomical number of families to deny from shelter each year-so large that its presence should naturally invite further inquiry and investigation. DHS promised that Virginia Williams accessibility would not decrease after their move. However, the number of calls that we receive regarding family shelter access has dropped dramatically. If the family shelter acceptance numbers have not drastically increased now, the decrease in need for assistance must be linked to a decrease in accessibility and/or knowledge of recourse for unjustified denials. The Mayor's budget also proposes over \$5 million for an additional VWFRC site without any details. That funding can be better spent on housing resources.

We ask this Committee to amend the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA) to require low barrier family shelter, including passage and funding of the Housing is Maternal Health Amendment Act of 2024, implement consistent and standardized staff training so that families are not routinely, arbitrarily, and unlawfully denied shelter placements, and increase reporting and data on access, eligibility, and denials to D.C. shelter services.

Additionally, the mayor has included a major and harmful proposed change to the HSRA in her Budget Support Act. In it, her administration attempts to restrict shelter eligibility and remove the right of non-congregate shelter from families accessing emergency family shelter. D.C. Council should not permit or pass such substantive changes to the HSRA in the BSA.

IV. Non-Congregate Shelter Expansion & Storage Funding

We ask that D.C. Council dedicate \$1.5 million towards secure storage options to safeguard the belongings of those experiencing homelessness, ensure current and future non-congregate shelter sites are operated as intended, including with legal protections pursuant to the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA), and invest additional funds for future non-congregate shelter sites.

V. ERAP

The Mayor has reduced ERAP by eighty-one (81%) percent from the level D.C. Council funded in FY25, despite rental costs, evictions, and housing insecurity in D.C. rising. We ask that D.C. Council increase ERAP to at least \$100 million and improve the application process to ensure that it is accessible and legally compliant. Recent legislation narrowed eligibility. A reduction in funds makes ERAP even more inaccessible.

VI. Conclusion

Many low-income D.C. residents feel like they are being assailed from all sides. The federal government is doing much to strip away protections and economic security from U.S. citizens, and this is more acutely felt in the District of Columbia than in most places. Now, more than ever, D.C. residents need a D.C. government that stands up and supports them. D.C residents need a budget that does not avert its eyes from the economic suffering of the most vulnerable and provides a rainfall of support to D.C.'s droughted human services sector.