

May 17, 2013

Phil Mendelson
Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW Suite 504
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairman Mendelson,

We, the undersigned organizations, support the goal of the District's Department of Human Services (DHS) to move families out of shelter as quickly as possible and to begin to open up emergency shelter year-round to families. To accomplish that goal we think that several steps need to be taken over the next year, many of which are currently underway — but not yet finalized — and some of which can be accomplished in the FY 2014 budget. In addition, several steps, both budget and non-budget related, need to be taken to address homelessness for individuals and youth.

The DC Council has already identified over \$1.4 million to help support increases in permanent supportive housing, services for LGBTQ homeless youth, emergency rental assistance, and the creation of a DC government position whose sole focus will be ending homelessness in DC. We applaud these efforts. However, the problems the District's homeless residents face are significant. We hope that the DC Council will find additional funding to support some of the key programs listed below to help take the necessary steps to addressing homelessness in DC.

We look forward to working with you, the Council and the Mayor to implement these steps over the next year and take significant steps towards addressing homelessness for families, individuals and youth in DC.

STEPS TO ADDRESS FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

- 1) Work with DHS, the Interagency Council on Homelessness and the community to implement changes to the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA) to support the dual goals of protecting vulnerable families and helping them get out of shelter quickly.** The proposed amendments to the HSRA in the FY 2014 Budget Support Act would make significant changes to the rights and responsibilities for families in emergency shelters, and thus need to go through the normal legislation process for a complete vetting. There is no doubt that the rules will be improved through this input and that this is the best way to address concerns that have been raised. We are committed to working over the summer with stakeholders on this through the normal legislative process. We are committed to this process being completed by October 1st. We also ask that the regulations have opportunity for community feedback during development.
- 2) Implement a comprehensive systems approach to ending family homelessness by matching appropriate housing and services resources to the assessed needs of family.** This approach combines careful and complete assessment of the homeless families' needs with the appropriate housing. We believe this program can be key to swiftly and safely moving families through the DC General shelter into housing this year. And we urge

relevant stakeholders to finalize a plan to accomplish this this year.

- 3) **Finalize regulations for rapid re-housing to ensure program follows best practices and includes protections for vulnerable families.** The Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP) moves families out of shelter quickly and into housing with supportive services for a year or more, and it is a central part of efforts to minimize placement of families in shelters. The regulations for this program are published but not yet complete. DHS recently held a stakeholder meeting to get feedback on Rapid Rehousing and will have another meeting in May to move forward on completing the process. We look forward to having the program rules finalized.

Because this is a relatively new program, ongoing training and guidance for providers is needed to ensure all rapid re-housing programs are operating under the same best practices. Moreover, the District should track outcomes to ensure families' needs are being met and to identify any areas of the program that may need to be modified in order to ensure vulnerable families are protected.

- 4) **[FY 2014 Budget] Fund new Permanent Supportive Housing slots.** Eight to ten percent of families in shelter have been identified as in need of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) — a program that provides housing assistance and services to chronically homeless individuals and families. Yet local funding for PSH in FY 2014 will only increase by \$486,000 to serve 25 seniors with no increase for families. The Interagency Council on Homelessness has come up with a seven year plan to end chronic homelessness in DC — it starts with \$4.3 million investment in the FY 2014 budget to begin to move families and individuals into permanent supportive housing.
- 5) **[FY 2014 Budget] Fund new tenant-based Local Rent Supplement slots.** The Local Rent Supplement Program provides rental assistance to very low-income families and the tenant-based portion of the program helps move families into housing quickly by giving them a rental housing voucher they can use in the private market. While Rapid Re-Housing is key to moving many families out of shelter, some families may need additional assistance to maintain housing after the Rapid Re-Housing assistance ends. Efforts to minimize family homelessness in DC must include an affordable housing component to address the wide gap between low-wage work in DC and the costs of housing.

LRSP is one of the main tools to make housing affordable to DC's lowest-income families. We are thrilled that there has been an increase in project/sponsor-based LRSP in the FY 14 budget, but there is no increase in tenant based LRSP in the FY 2014 budget. Increasing funds for tenant-based LRSP would help make new homes affordable to very low-income families and would be an important start on efforts to expand affordable housing. These families would be pulled from the DC Housing Authority waitlist that has a preference for homeless families (which is broader than just families in DC General Shelter) and will help reduce the need for shelter by providing more affordable housing options.

- 6) **Improve Emergency Rental Assistance.** Emergency Rental Assistance is a key tool for preventing homelessness but the program could be modified to ensure it is targeting those most at risk as well as better connect residents to services. We are thrilled that \$1 million was added to the program in the mayor's proposed budget and that an additional \$300,000

was added by the Committee on Government Operations during mark-ups. We hope to work with stakeholders this year to discuss how to make improvements to the program.

- 7) **Open access to shelter year round.** Opening up shelter for families with no safe place to stay year round is critical. With the significant increase in homeless families, DC has stopped opening emergency shelter year round and opened just during hypothermia season. This has led to a significant crush of families seeking shelter at once which has led to tremendous pressures on programs and services to assist them. By taking the above steps, DC can reduce pressure on the shelter system and open up access to families year round.

STEPS TO ADDRESS INDIVIDUAL HOMELESSNESS

DC's current efforts to address individual homelessness are primarily focused on providing emergency services, including shelter, transportation, and meals. While these are important, life-saving services, they do not prevent homelessness and are not designed to help individuals transition out of homelessness. To address individual homelessness, the District needs to provide a full spectrum of targeted services, like those being developed to help families.

- 1) **Centralized system to assess individuals and refer to appropriate program.** Research has found that centralized intake is key to preventing homelessness and helping individuals leave homelessness.¹ It enhances the quality of client assessment and ensures that clients are provided with the services they need. It is also a requirement of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, the law that governs federal homelessness funding.
- 2) **[FY 2014 Budget] Expand eligibility for Emergency Rental Assistance.** Emergency Rental Assistance is a key tool for preventing homelessness, but under the current program individuals without children are eligible only if they are seniors or have a disability. DC could pilot an ERAP expansion to cover low-income singles who are not elderly and without a disability but are at risk for homelessness.
- 3) **[FY 2014 Budget] Expand Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) program to serve all residents in need.** IDA provides a modest \$270 per month to residents with disabilities – individuals who cannot work and have no other income – while they await a decision on their federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) application. Without this assistance, many individuals turn to more costly emergency medical and shelter services, creating a greater strain on the District's budget.

Additionally DC offers no application help to SSI applicants, despite the difficulty of the application process. Providing this assistance can lead to quicker determinations and higher acceptance rates. Quicker determinations will reduce the number of months a recipient receives IDA, and higher acceptance rates will increase the amount of federal reimbursement the District receives. The mayor's proposed FY 2014 budget includes \$1 million to provide this assistance, but it is on the revenue contingency list rather than being actually funded.

¹ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. Centralized Intake for Helping People Experiencing Homelessness: Overview, Community Profiles, and Resources hudhre.info/documents/HPRP_CentralizedIntake.pdf

- 4) **Restart rapid re-housing for individuals.** Rapid Re-Housing moves people out of shelter quickly and into housing with supportive services. With federal funding, DC was able to serve individuals through the program in prior years. But little or no federal funding will be available in FY 2014, leaving individuals un-served. Other cities have implemented rapid re-housing programs for individuals with success. DHS has expressed interest in restarting the rapid re-housing program for individuals. We urge DHS to create this program and help move individuals out of shelter quickly.
- 5) **[FY 2014 Budget] Fund new slots for Permanent Supportive Housing.** The Interagency Council on Homeless estimates that 2,562 individuals need Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) — a program that provides housing and services to chronically homeless individuals and families. Yet local funding for PSH in FY 2014 will only increase by \$486,000 to serve 25 additional households. The Interagency Council on Homelessness has come up with a seven-year plan to end chronic homelessness in DC, and it starts with a \$4.3 million investment in the FY 2014 budget to begin to move families and individuals into permanent supportive housing.
- 6) **[FY 2014 Budget] Expand tenant-based Local Rent Supplement for individuals.** The Local Rent Supplement Program provides rental assistance to very low-income families and individuals. The tenant-based portion of the program helps move residents into housing quickly by giving them a rental housing voucher they can use in the private market. Currently, by statute, all tenant-based LRSP is prioritized for homeless families. By designating some portion of the program to homeless individuals (the definition of homeless is broader than someone living in shelter) DC could also provide affordable housing to low-income single residents experiencing homelessness and reduce demand for shelter by increasing housing options.

STEPS TO ADDRESS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The District's current efforts to address unaccompanied youth who are homeless are not meeting the need. Nearly 300 youth seeking emergency shelter were turned away in February 2013. Homelessness as a youth can lead to chronic homelessness as an adult, so reducing youth homelessness can have long-term payoffs. Additionally, when youth must focus on finding a safe place to sleep, they cannot focus on school, training, or employment, the keys to future success. Youth need developmentally appropriate services, targeted to their specific needs.

- 1) **Create a youth-friendly referral and intake process.** A specialized referral and intake process can provide age-appropriate assessments and connect youth to appropriate housing and services. This process will include quickly reconnecting youth with the public or charter school system, if applicable.
- 2) **[FY 2014 Budget] Invest \$4.6 million to increase capacity in youth system.** This will create 125 emergency shelter and Independent Living beds. During mark-ups, nearly \$500,000 was found to provide services for LGBTQ youth, but an additional \$4.6 million is to meet the youth need. Shelter beds meet emergency needs while Independent Living beds provide longer term housing and the support services youth need to transition to adulthood.

- 3) **Connect emergency shelter with family stabilization services.** Reconnecting youth with their families when possible is a proven strategy to combat persistent youth homelessness. Shelter offers a break from family conflict and the opportunity to provide critical family stabilization services. These include providing support in resolving the current conflict and by equipping both the youth and their families with the skills to manage normal family conflict in a healthy and productive way.

ONGOING PRODUCTION AND PRESERVATION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS A KEY COMPONENT OF ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS FOR FAMILIES, INDIVIDUALS AND YOUTH

In addition to these steps, the District must remain committed to, at the same time, increasing and preserving the supply of affordable housing in DC which will help address family, individual and youth homelessness. This housing must especially serve those making under 30 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI). The FY 2014 budget makes significant investments into the production of affordable housing, largely through the Housing Production Trust Fund and Project and Sponsor Based LRSP. These investments would need to continue going forward if DC wants to reach the goal set by the Mayor of 10,000 net new units and 8,000 preserved units of affordable housing by 2020.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Catholic Charities
Children's Law Center
Community of Hope
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
D.C. Catholic Conference
DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence
DC Fiscal Policy Institute
District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH)
Good Faith Communities Coalition
Homeless Children's Playtime Project
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia
Miriam's Kitchen
SOME (So Others Might Eat)
Transitional Housing Corporation (THC)
Washington Interfaith Network (WIN)
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

cc: Councilmember Yvette Alexander
Councilmember Marion Barry
Councilmember Anita Bonds
Councilmember Muriel Bowser
Councilmember David Catania

Councilmember Mary Cheh
Councilmember Jack Evans
Councilmember Jim Graham
Councilmember David Grosso
Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie
Councilmember Vincent Orange
Councilmember Tommy Wells
Jennifer Budoff, DC Council Budget Director