



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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DC's Winter Plan: A Step Forward, But Much More Work to Be Done

By Jenny Reed

DC should expect an increase in family homelessness this winter, according to a plan passed this week by the city's Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH). That may not seem especially surprising, but it's actually very important.

That's because last year's plan failed to acknowledge the scope of the problem, with disastrous results: District officials, facing an unplanned-for surge in homelessness, chose to place families in recreation centers – which courts later ruled illegal – and to put families out of shelter any winter day that didn't fall below 32 degrees, even if they had no safe place to go.

By better predicting the scope of the problem, this year's ICH plan includes several recommendations to make sure the city is better prepared when winter comes. The ICH – made up of government officials, advocates, homeless services providers and residents who are or have been homeless – produces a winter shelter plan each year. (DCFPI's Kate Coventry is a member.)

Some key highlights of the plan:

- **A realistic estimate of the expected need:** The plan projects 840 families will seek shelter this winter, an increase of more than 100 from last year. This projection was prompted in part by a large increase in the number of families seeking help this summer.
- **Acknowledgement that DC will need overflow shelter:** The District has 409 shelter units for families, fewer than half the number needed this winter, and they probably will be full at the start of hypothermia season. The ICH plan calls on DC's Department of General Services to



Photo by: AgnosticPreachersKid, available [here](#).

identify options to pursue now for meeting this challenge, from using DC-owned buildings to short-term apartment leases to motels. DC will need to act quickly on this recommendation if the units are going to be available this winter and make additional resources available to operate them.

- **A call for system improvements:** Many families stay in shelter for too long, exacerbating their problems and making it hard to serve newly homeless families. The ICH recommends that the officials who run the city's homeless services programs, like Permanent Supportive Housing, take steps to make sure those programs can be used throughout winter. Last year, PSH and other programs could not be fully used, despite available funding, due to administrative problems.

These recommendations, if followed, will help ensure DC's homeless services work better. In particular, the District should focus on moving families more quickly out of shelter into appropriate housing, while allowing families to stay in shelter until such housing is identified.

The winter plan doesn't address the larger issues of the family shelter system, and in many ways leaves us with the same system as last year. It is not a long-term solution to family homelessness. But the ICH will complete a new strategic plan over the next year, which will identify the changes needed for a long-term fix. It will then be up to a new mayor and Council to act assertively to implement the reforms and make them a reality.