



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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More Than Dignity: Safe and Decent Shelter Is Critical to Limiting the Harm to Children from Being Homeless

By Kate Coventry

A bill to clarify that families who become homeless are sheltered in apartments or private rooms, and that they can stay there until they find suitable housing, is known as the “dignity bill,” but it is about much more than that. By creating some stability at a time of crisis, this legislation will help parents get back on their feet and help children avoid emotional and behavioral problems that get in the way of doing well at school.

The Dignity for Homeless Families bill was introduced after the experience last winter when the District started sheltering homeless families in recreation centers and required families to reapply for shelter every day. At the recreation centers, lights were often left on all night, and families had only flimsy partitions that did little to block out noise and strangers. Two superior court judges ruled that the placements were a violation of the law and that they posed significant risks of harm to children. The legal challenges continue.

Chaotic environments—characterized by noise, crowding, lack of routine, and unplanned changes—can hurt a child’s [cognitive functioning](#) and lead to behavioral problems. [Housing instability](#) and frequent moves create the same problems. Families who had to reapply for shelter each day last year couldn’t look for work or search for permanent housing.

Sheltering families in apartments or private rooms, by contrast, can help families maintain family routines and shut out noise and strangers. Allowing families to have continuous access to safe and decent shelter, without having to reapply daily, would reduce instability and allow parents to focus on looking for work and regaining housing.

So while giving homeless families a private place to stay is about dignity, it also is about making sure that homelessness doesn’t cause long-term problems for parents and children.

