

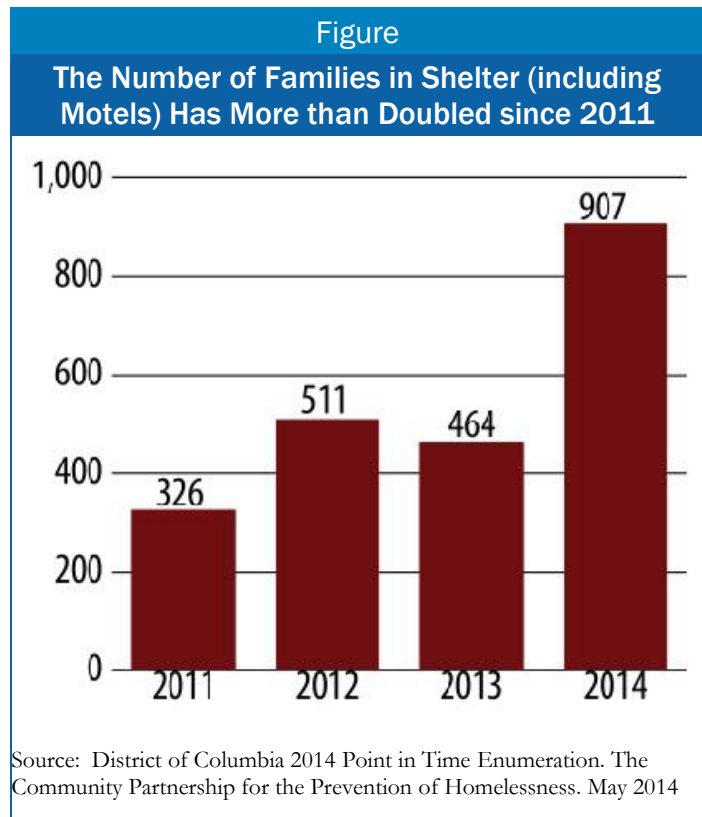
TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At the Public Oversight Roundtable on
The Winter Plan: Protecting the Lives of Homeless People in the Winter of 2014-2015
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services
October 29, 2014

Chairman Graham and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

I am here today to talk about the grave concerns the DC Fiscal Policy Institute has for the District's ability to adequately serve homeless families this winter. These include DC's ability to: secure needed overflow shelter capacity, identify funding needed for both shelter and Rapid Re-housing, and quickly exit families from shelter.

The District Has Not Identified Needed Overflow Shelter for the Upcoming Winter.

The Interagency Council on Homelessness, of which I am a member, predicted in the FY 2015 Winter Plan that the District would need to shelter 840 families during hypothermia season. This projected 16 percent increase in homeless families over last year is driven by the fact that a greater number of families have sought out shelter and housing assistance over the summer, than last year.¹ And by the fact that since 2010, the number of families with children in emergency shelter (including motel rooms that the



¹ The number of families seeking assistance was 26 percent higher during May through July 2014 than during the same period in 2013.

District uses when all other shelter units are occupied) has more than doubled on the night of the annual point in time count, from 326 to 907 families (see **Figure**). The Winter Plan recognized that existing shelter capacity is not sufficient to meet the need and that overflow capacity would need to be identified. To date, the District has not identified this overflow shelter.

Like at the start of FY 2014 hypothermia season, DC's ability to place incoming families will be hampered because of the number of families who entered shelter during the previous hypothermia season and have not yet exited. The District is currently sheltering 207 families and DC General Family Shelter's maximum capacity is 248.² It is clear that the District will have to use overflow shelter capacity almost immediately after hypothermic weather begins — which could be as early as this weekend — but the District has not released a plan outlining how it will secure the needed capacity. Given the possible demand for additional shelter within the next few weeks, it is critical that the District release its plan for overflow shelter capacity quickly.

The District Has Not Identified Funding Necessary to Add Overflow Shelter Capacity and Provide Sufficient Levels of Rapid Re-housing Assistance

In the Winter Plan, the Interagency Council on Homelessness recognized that additional resources, outside of the homeless services budget, would need to be identified to pay for overflow shelter. The Office of the Chief Financial Officer confirms this, reporting that there is a \$11.4 million shortfall in the family shelter budget.³ This is partly because this year, unlike previous years, DHS does not have federal carryover funding available. In fiscal year 2014, DHS spent \$9 million in federal carryover on services for homeless families but has no carryover for this year. It is also unclear if it has enough funding for the Rapid Re-housing program. Rapid Re-housing (RRH) is DHS's primary tool for moving families out of shelter. Last year, DHS did not have sufficient RRH slots at certain points during the year, meaning families did not receive assistance in a timely way and spent more time in shelter.

With the possibility that the District will need overflow shelter in the next few weeks, it is also critical that the District release a plan outlining how it will fund the needed overflow shelter capacity and fund sufficient RRH slots so that it can help families exit shelter quickly.

DCFPI is concerned that a lack of identified capacity and needed funding could lead DHS to resort to harmful practices first implemented in FY 2014: sheltering families in recreation centers and placing families only for hypothermic periods. Two superior court judges deemed recreation center placements a violation of the Homeless Services Reform Act and found that these placements posed significant risks of harm to children.

At the same time the District started sheltering families for just one night at a time and only on hypothermic nights, ending the long standing practice of sheltering families until they found alternative housing. Families were forced to reapply for shelter each day at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center, which interfered with their ability to work, look for work, search for housing, and participate in required Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) employment preparation activities.

² Emergency Shelter Nightly Census 10/26/2014. Because of a temporary injunction, DC cannot use 40 rooms at DC General Family Shelter, bringing the total capacity available for FY 2015 to 248 rooms.

³ Fiscal Impact Statement – Dignity for Homeless Families Amendment Act of 2014. October 15, 2014.

The District Should Make Improving the Rate at Which It Exits Families From Shelter a Top Priority

Finally, the District needs to outline how it will increase the monthly shelter exit rate to 100 families per month, the goal set by the DHS Director this past April and the level needed to keep pace with incoming families. Shorter shelter stays improve family well-being and reduce the risk that DHS will run out of shelter space. The exit rate increased from 46 families a month in May to 63 families a month in August, but more needs to be done.

It is critical that the mayor and DHS explain to the public and the DC Council how they will shelter all families safely in the upcoming winter. This means detailing how they will identify and fund needed overflow shelter, how they will ensure sufficient Rapid Re-housing slots are available, and how they plan to improve the exit rate to reduce the length of time a family stays in shelter.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions.