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## How DC Can Act Now to Help Homeless Families

By Kate Coventry

As DC faces another homeless families crisis this winter, there are immediate steps the Bowser administration can take to meet its commitment to address this problem. This includes increasing staffing to serve families when they apply for shelter and to help children at the DC General Shelter, and modifying the city's Rapid Re-Housing program used to get families out of shelter.

The latest numbers show that DC's homeless crisis continues to grow. There were 7,748 homeless residents in DC last year, 1,200 more than in 2010. This winter, the District has rented space at six motels to add to the capacity at the DC General shelter for families, to deal with an expected 16 increase in homeless families this year.

While fully addressing the crisis will take time, here are three things the District can do right now:

### **Increase staff to make sure families seeking shelter get the right kind of help.**

The Virginia Williams Family Resource Center does not have enough staff to serve the increasing number of

families applying for shelter. These staff can help families identify options other than shelter, such as staying with a family member, but this searching can take time. Without enough staff, some families are unnecessarily put in shelter when alternatives might be available. In other situations, the quick decisions staff must make has led some families to be denied eligibility for shelter wrongfully, leaving parents and children to stay in unsafe locations such as abandoned buildings or cars.

**Make critical changes to Rapid Re-housing to better serve families.** Rapid Re-housing (RRH) helps families move out of shelter by providing short-term rental assistance, case management and help finding a job. But DC does not follow nationally recommended strategies, such as offering longer periods of rental assistance when it is clear a family needs it. Additionally, the District has no system for helping families if they face challenges paying rent on their own after leaving the program, even though this is a common issue.



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

**Meet the needs of children at DC General Family Shelter.** Last year, the city approved funds to hire up to 10 licensed social workers to get the children at DC General the services they need to succeed, such as tutoring or help with disabilities support services. However, Mayor Bowser has allowed the funding for this to remain frozen, because the city faces some challenges to balancing its budget this year. The District should release this modest amount of funding as soon as possible. In the meantime, the District should explore whether other government agencies can provide these critical services in the short-term.

To read a copy of the DCFPI's testimony on this issue last week, click [here](#).