



*An Affiliate of the
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*
820 First Street NE, Suite 460
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 408-1080 Fax (202) 408-8173
www.dcfpi.org

**TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At a Public Oversight Roundtable on
The Interagency Council on Homelessness Strategic Plan: Homeward DC
District of Columbia Committee of the Whole
May 15, 2015**

Chairman Mendelson 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 also a voting member of the District's Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH).

I am here today to testify on family homelessness in the District, to strongly support the new ICH Strategic Plan, and to encourage the Council to fully fund the fiscal year (FY) 2016 Strategic Plan targets and allocate additional funding to affordable housing for families.

Rising Family Homelessness in the District Is Consistent with Trends in Other Communities

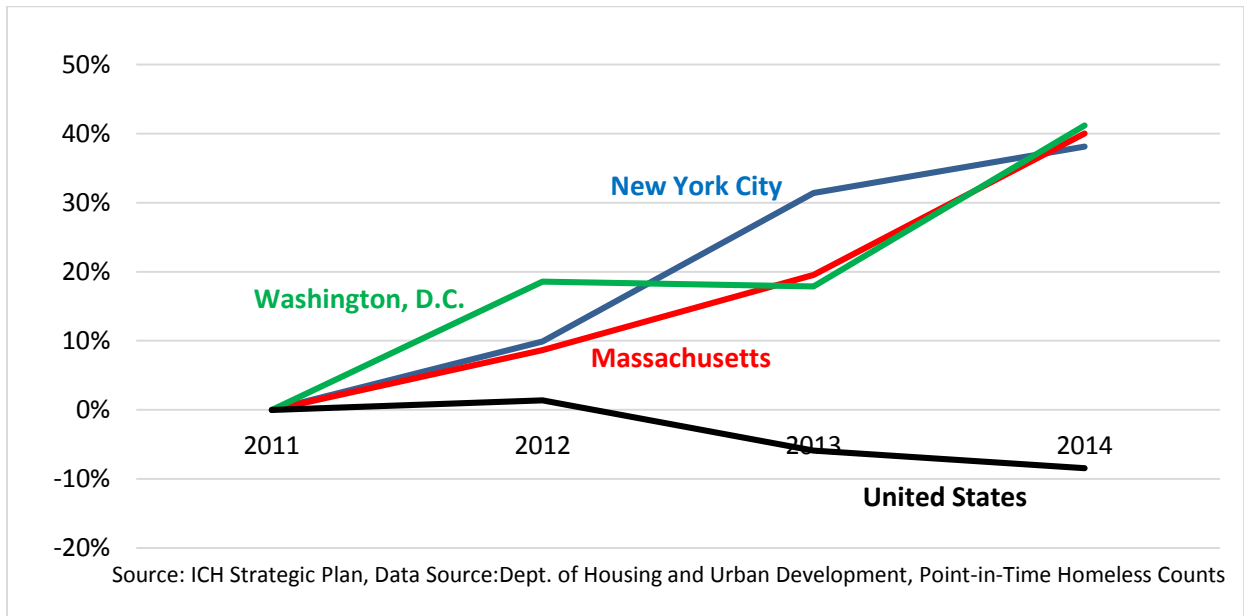
The District of Columbia has seen rising homelessness in recent years, particularly among families with children. As described in the Strategic Plan, the number of families counted during the annual Point in Time Count increased 50 percent between 2010 and 2014 while the number of families counted nationally decreased by 11 percent. While this appears to make the District look out of step with the rest of the nation, a closer examination of the Point in Time methodology and other homelessness data reveals that family housing instability is rapidly growing in both the District and the nation.

The Point in Time counts families who are unsheltered, staying in emergency shelter or in transitional housing programs. It does not capture the vast number of families who are living doubled up with another family. In most communities, the homeless services system has a fixed shelter budget and shelter capacity. Once that capacity is met, families are turned away. They then are not counted during Point in Time unless they are staying on the street, a rare practice for families.

In the District, however, the Homeless Service Reform Act provides for a legal right to shelter when the temperature falls below freezing. This means that because we do more to serve homeless families, we count families who would have otherwise been in doubled-up situations. That means the Point in Time count identifies a larger share of homeless families, and better reveal homeless trends, than in communities without a right to shelter.

A comparison of the District’s numbers against other communities that guarantee a legal right to shelter shows that DC is not an anomaly. In other right-to-shelter jurisdictions, family homelessness increased by roughly 40 percent since 2011.¹ See Figure 1 from the ICH Strategic Plan below.

Figure 1: Percent Change in Family Homelessness in Right to Shelter Jurisdictions



The US Department of Education (ED) data offers further evidence of increasing family homelessness across the country. For its homeless assistance programs, ED uses a definition that includes doubled-up households. ED’s data shows a 34 percent increase in family homelessness across the country over a 3-year period.²

Table 1: ED Count of Homeless Children/Youth (School Year (SY) 2009/2010 – SY 2012/2013)

Jurisdiction	SY 09/10	SY 12/13	Percent Change
United States	938,948	1,258,182	34%
District of Columbia	2,499	3,766	51%
Source: ICH Strategic Plan			

¹ Corinth, Kevin C. *4 Charts that Expose the Invisible Side of Homelessness*, AEI Ideas: The Public Policy Blog of the American Enterprise Institute (blog). American Enterprise Institute, November 10, 2014. <https://www.aei.org/publication/4-charts-expose-invisible-side-homelessness/>.

² The US Department of Education collects information from Educational Agencies to determine the extent to which States ensure that children and youth experiencing homelessness have access to a free, appropriate education. State and Local Educational Agencies count students that are sheltered, unsheltered, living in hotels/motels, and/or doubled-up situations. This count is more expansive than HUD’s count (which does not include families who are doubled-up) and results in a different nationwide trend for family homelessness. See: <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/>.

ICH Strategic Plan Is Ambitious but Achievable

The ICH Strategic Plan released this spring offers a comprehensive and realistic plan to end long term homelessness by 2020 and give all DC residents the chance to build a better future. Acknowledging that it will never be possible to prevent all the life events that can lead to homelessness, such as divorce or job loss, the Strategic Plan is designed to make homelessness:

- **Rare.** Homelessness will be prevented whenever possible. This will involve the expansion of prevention programs that help people who face eviction. It also will require coordination with other agencies to ensure residents transitioning out of foster care, juvenile justice, or other systems do not become homeless.
- **Brief.** When homelessness cannot be prevented, services will be provided quickly to help residents move into stable housing.
- **Non-recurring.** The District will provide support services to make sure residents do not become homeless again.

The Plan identifies how much and what kinds of housing assistance will likely be needed over the next five years. The ICH intends to annually monitor the need, evaluate progress towards the goals laid out in the Plan, and offer funding recommendations. That last part is especially important because, to make these goals a reality, the money needs to be there for priorities such as new emergency shelters and permanent supportive housing.

FY 2016 Budget Makes Significant Progress on Plan, But More Is Needed

The proposed FY 2016 budget significantly increases funding to help residents move out of shelters and into their own homes. It entirely meets the Strategic Plan targets for families and makes partial progress toward the FY 2016 target for individuals. This means that without additional funding, individuals will spend more time in shelters than they need to, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives. It also means that the District may not meet the Strategic Plan goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2017.

With an additional investment of just over \$5 million, the DC Council can help nearly 400 additional individuals move out of shelter and put the District on track to fully meet the ICH goals.

The proposed budget includes funds to provide Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) to 250 chronically homeless individuals. These are residents who have been homeless for a long time and have a significant disabling condition that makes it difficult for them to stay in housing without support. PSH combines long-term affordable housing and case management, like counseling and connecting folks with community services. This is a significant expansion but falls short of the Strategic Plan target of serving 365 individuals. ***An additional \$1.8 million is needed to fill this gap.***

The budget also includes funds for Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) for 455 individuals. RRH helps individuals find housing and employment and helps them pay rent for a period of time, generally up to 12 months. The Strategic Plan projects that more than 2,500 individuals will need RRH next year, but it would not be possible for the city to expand the program's capacity that much even if all the needed funding were available. ***With an additional \$1 million,*** the program can expand to its highest possible capacity for FY 2016 and help an additional 100 individuals move out of shelter.

The budget combines local funds with federally funded vouchers to help 150 individuals through Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH). TAH is a new initiative that provides long-term affordable housing with no or minimal support services. The program will serve residents who need help paying rent after their short-term RRH rental subsidy ends and PSH residents who reach a point of no longer needing the intensive services provided by PSH but still need help paying their rent. ***To meet the Strategic Plan target, an extra \$2.3 million is needed to house 188 individuals.*** We thank the Committee on Transportation and the Environment and the Committee on Housing and Community Development for working together to allocate nearly \$648,000 towards this need during markups.

Finally, the Strategic Plan recognizes that “in the long run, increasing the supply of affordable housing is the single largest homelessness prevention measure we can take as a community.” Yet the proposed new budget provides no funding to expand tenant-based Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) – the program most helpful to the working poor and households on low fixed incomes – except rental assistance tied directly to homeless or formerly homeless families. ***With an additional investment of \$5 million in LRSP, the DC Council would make progress towards this goal by helping more than 300 families afford rent.***

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