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Safety Concerns Need to Be Addressed in Family Shelter Plan

By Kate Coventry

Mayor Bowser's decision earlier this year to replace the dilapidated DC General shelter for homeless families was widely praised. But it has raised concerns recently, because her plan for the new shelters would give families a single room for living and sleeping, rather than a full apartment as called for under current law.

DCFPI thinks this could work if key issues are addressed, particularly safety issues, and if the District has enough apartment-style units for families with special needs. We hope these concerns can be worked out through a new committee created by the Mayor to make design recommendations for the new shelters.



Photo by: Johnathan Comer. Available [here](#).

Replacing DC General is long overdue. The building is old and has constant problems with heating and cooling. It shelters too many families—up to 260 at one time—requiring greater security, including metal detectors, than a small shelter would. And it was never meant to be a shelter so it lacks sufficient spaces for activities like studying or parenting classes. The proposed shelters address these issues. They will be new or newly renovated and will house no more than 50 families. Each shelter will have a computer lab, study areas, and meeting space for classes and other activities.

While DC's other family shelters consist of private apartments, the proposed shelters will primarily consist of a single private room per family, without kitchens, bathrooms, or separate bedrooms. Private rooms take up less space than apartments, allowing the District to shelter more families at each site.

But private rooms will require families to share bathrooms, posing safety concerns, particularly as many families have experienced trauma. Additionally some families have disabilities that require a private bathroom or cooking facilities to prepare special diets. and creating opportunities for conflict.

The Mayor has created an Interagency Council on Homelessness *Committee on Design Guidelines for Emergency Housing for Families Experiencing Homelessness* to create guidelines for the new shelters. DCFPI will serve on the committee, and we hope to work with other members—government leaders, providers, national homelessness experts, residents who have experienced homelessness, and other advocates—to address these concerns so we can move forward to replace DC General.

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