



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Let's Get Started Now on Ending Homelessness in DC

By Ed Lazere

Many hearts were broken to learn this year that 600 children were living in DC's largest family emergency shelter. That crisis is still with us. With the District's budget for 2014 about to be passed by the DC Council, it is time to take action so that the same problem won't be repeated next winter.

Today, a group of homeless service providers and advocates sent a letter to DC Council Chairman Mendelson and the rest of the Council, urging them to use final budget deliberations to put the District on a path to ending homelessness. There is broad agreement about the goals to focus on: opening access to shelter for families year-round, rather than restricting access to periods of cold weather; minimizing the length of time spent in emergency shelter; and reducing chronic homelessness. The letter highlights steps to address homelessness among families, single individuals, and youth.

The good news is that steps already are being taken that will help reduce homelessness. Mayor Gray's budget added funds for youth homeless services, emergency rental assistance, rent subsidies that flow through housing providers, and a program to move families out of shelter quickly. This past week, the DC Council identified additional funds for chronically homeless seniors, homeless LGBTQ youth, emergency rental assistance, and to create a "homelessness czar." And Councilmembers Mary Cheh and Jim Graham just announced a broad plan to end homelessness. They should be applauded for setting a vision we can aim for. Their plan would be funded by applying the sales tax to online sales, assuming Congress adopts legislation to allow DC and the states to do so.

But there is more the District can do to make progress now, including in the budget the Council will approve next week.

Develop New Program Guidelines to Get Homeless Families into Housing Quickly: A key tool to getting families out of shelter is "rapid re-housing," under which families are moved into housing quickly and get rental help and services that last from one to two years. This may be enough to get many families back on their feet. The regulations for this program are published but not yet complete, and the program cannot be fully implemented until this is done.

Expand Supportive Housing for Chronically Homeless residents: A small share of homeless residents face challenges that can lead to long-term homelessness, such as severe mental illness. DC's Permanent Supportive Housing program follows the successful "housing first" approach of placing residents into housing and then using that stability to address the challenges that led to homelessness. The plan of the Interagency Council on Homelessness to end chronic homelessness calls for \$4.3 million in new funding for Permanent Supportive Housing in FY 2014, but so far the budget includes only \$500,000 in new funding.

Help Families with the High Cost of Rental Housing: Efforts to reduce homelessness in the long-term must address the wide gap between low-wage work in DC and the very high costs of housing. A parent currently needs to earn \$29 an hour to afford a decent two-bedroom apartment in DC, but nearly half of DC jobs pay less than that. DC's Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) provides rent subsidies to either for-profit or non-profit developers to help make units affordable to low-income families or directly to families so they can afford the rent in private market housing. There are no new funds for the tenant-based side of LRSP, which goes directly to families, in the proposed budget. This side of LRSP is critical because the housing assistance can be deployed quickly and help address some of DC's immediate affordable housing needs.

Keep More Residents From Losing Their Homes. DC's Emergency Rental Assistance program (ERAP) for families facing eviction should be modified to ensure it is targeting those most at risk and to better connect residents to services. Additionally under the current program, individuals without children are eligible only if they are seniors or have a disability. DC could pilot an ERAP expansion to cover low-income singles who are not elderly and without a disability but are at risk for homelessness.

Coming together as a city to end family homelessness is something we should all rally around. It is time for the DC Council and Mayor Gray to start putting the pieces in place to make it a reality.

The sign- on letter can be found [here](#).