



July 1, 2013

## Revised Homeless Services Reform Act Benefits DC

By Kate Coventry

Last week's final vote on the Budget Support Act of 2014 included major changes to the law governing the District's homeless services system. The provisions of the Homeless Services Reform Act approved by the Council made significant improvements to the initial proposal submitted by Mayor Gray. Among the changes, the Council dropped a "provisional placement" proposal that would have restricted the legal rights of certain homeless families to shelter, revised the termination policy for residents in permanent supportive housing, and created a mandatory savings plan for homeless residents that is not punitive for those families who have limitations on how much they can save.

The changes came about through major collaboration between community groups, advocates, Gray administration officials and the Council, particularly Committee on Human Services Chairman Jim Graham and Council Chairman Phil Mendelson. Nearly 200 organizations signed a letter asking the Council to delay a vote on the provisions included in the Budget Support Act until a hearing could be held. The Council held a public hearing on June 3, and more than 60 witnesses offered testimony. In response to concerns expressed at this hearing, Council Chairman Phil Mendelson and Human Services Committee Chairman Jim Graham offered a number of changes to the mayor's proposal and these changes were adopted by the Council.

The Council dropped the mayor's proposal to create a "provisional placement" policy for homeless families. This would have allowed the Department of Human Services to place a family in shelter for a period of time while determining whether a family was eligible for shelter and whether that family may be able to stay with friends or family. Provisional families would not have the same legal protections, such as the right to 15-day notice of shelter termination and the right to continued shelter pending a legal appeal of termination. A number of witnesses at the June 3 hearing expressed concerns about the potential for shelter terminations to be made in error. These witnesses urged the Council to ensure that families have continued access to shelter pending review of these terminations as, otherwise, affected families may be forced to sleep in unsafe conditions during this period. Given these concerns, the Council removed the provisional placement policy from the amendments.

The Council retained the mayor's proposal to require shelter residents to pay into savings accounts, but added a requirement that escrow plans have to be tailored to each resident's individual circumstances and expenses. For instance, a resident with high medical costs due to illness would have these costs considered when determining how much he would be required to contribute.

Additionally, the Council dropped a provision that would have allowed residents to be terminated from shelter for failing to contribute to escrow. Instead, residents who fail to pay escrow will face sanctions, such as loss of traveling privileges. These sanctions will be outlined in the shelter's rules that are provided to each resident upon entering the shelter.

Finally, the Department of Human Services worked collaboratively with the Council, providers, and advocates on changes to the Permanent Supportive Housing program (PSH), also known as Housing First. PSH provides long-term housing and case management services to chronically homeless individuals and families. The chronically homeless typically suffer from chronic and life-threatening health conditions and severe mental illness. In the mayor's initial proposal, residents who were absent from their unit for more than 60 days could lose both their housing and supportive services. Given the program, by definition, serves those at high need for hospitalization or in-patient rehabilitation, advocates and providers were concerned that residents would not seek these needed services if doing so could lead them to lose their housing. DHS extended the period of absence to 180 days, guaranteed that residents would get notice prior to a termination, and would be prioritized for rehousing upon their release.

DCFPI thanks the Council for providing time for the community to weigh-in on proposed changes and for revising the amendments in response to community feedback.