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**TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At the Public Oversight Roundtable on
The Winter Plan: Protecting the Lives of Homeless People in the Winter of 2013-2014
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services
October 29, 2013**

Chairman Graham 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 here today to talk about several concerns the DC Fiscal Policy Institute has for the District's ability to adequately serve homeless families and individuals. These include: DC's ability to serve unaccompanied youth through the Winter Plan, the loss of local Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) vouchers through attrition, and our ability to serve families this winter, particularly as it relates to domestic violence victims and progress on DC's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) redesign.

Ensuring Adequate Emergency Shelter Capacity for Youth in the Winter Plan

DCFPI thanks the Department of Human Services (DHS) for identifying funding to add six additional emergency youth beds to help serve youth this winter. This brings the total number of emergency youth beds to 12 and we are hopeful that DHS is correct in its estimation that this capacity will be sufficient to serve youth this winter.

However, we believe that the Winter Plan (Plan) must outline what will happen if need for emergency shelter outstrips this capacity to ensure that the Plan serves its dual purposes of describing how the homeless will be protected from cold weather injury and ensuring that shelter staff know what to do during hypothermic weather. Without including this language in the Plan, youth may end up outside during hypothermic weather, at-risk for cold weather injury and death.

DCFPI urges DHS to work with the Child and Family Services Agency and other Interagency Council on Homelessness members to outline what shelter providers should do if the youth providers have no available beds.

A Loss of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) Through Attrition

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) provides housing and supportive services to the chronically homeless, who typically suffer from life-threatening health conditions and/or severe mental illness. However, the District is reducing its investment in this proven program to end chronic homelessness by letting vouchers go unused after families or individuals leave the program. As a

result, more households are languishing on the waitlist than need to be, many trapped in the emergency shelter system at great cost to the District. And these households are not receiving the supportive services they need to improve their lives.

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) reports that the research is clear: PSH ends chronic homelessness.¹ PSH is also cost effective, reducing reliance on more expensive crisis-related services like emergency rooms, psychiatric hospital, and jail. A Seattle study found that PSH, or Housing First as it's commonly referred to, saved the city almost \$30,000 per person, per year. PSH also improves health outcomes.² A Denver study of Housing First residents before and after enrollment in the program found that approximately half had improved health and mental health status, and the program led to a 72 percent decline in emergency-related costs.³

Despite these benefits to participants and cost savings PSH can provide for the District, DHS reported at the fiscal year 2013 performance oversight hearing that it was replacing local vouchers with federal vouchers whenever possible and that locally funded vouchers were being reduced through attrition. This led to a loss of ninety-nine locally-funded PSH vouchers in fiscal year 2012. This local funding was then used plug budget shortfalls in other parts of the homeless services system, particularly the hypothermia budget.

DCFPI asks that DHS stop the practice of letting local vouchers go unused through attrition. If we aim to end chronic homelessness, we must continue our local investment in PSH. If other homeless services programs, particularly hypothermia services, consistently have budget shortfalls, this should be transparently discussed and other sources of funding secured.

The Current Intake System for Families Experiencing Homelessness Could Put those Fleeing Domestic Violence At Risk

DCFPI has concerns about the treatment of domestic violence victims at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (FRC), the entry point for families seeking shelter. Staffers often verify the family's need for shelter by contacting friends, family, and acquaintances. While recognizing that these contacts help FRC staff determine the best housing options for each client, contacting individuals without seeking explicit permission from clients is dangerous for families fleeing domestic violence.

Recently, a mother went to the FRC seeking shelter. Without her knowledge or consent, the FRC worker called her abuser who at this point had not realized she had left him. After the call, the mother told the FRC worker about the abuse, but instead of connecting her to resources, the worker advised her to return to her abuser to avoid becoming homeless. DCFPI has signed onto the DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence's request that FRC workers provide families with release of information, allowing them to designate who the FRC may contact. Additionally, DCFPI asks the Department to develop a written protocol and provide adequate training to ensure that staff know how to address the special needs of domestic violence victims.

¹ USICH. *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. 2010.

<http://www.epaperflip.com/aglaia/viewer.aspx?docid=1dc1e97f82884912a8932a3502c37c02>

² National Alliance to End Homelessness. *Fact Sheet: Chronic Homelessness*. 2010

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/fact-sheet-chronic-homelessness>

³ Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. *Denver Housing First Collaborative: Cost Benefit Analysis and Program Outcomes Report*. 2006. <http://shnny.org/research/denver-housing-first-collaborative/>

A Lack of Coordination and Resources for Family Homelessness Can Hinder DC's Progress on Its TANF Redesign

The lack of resources for homeless families threatens the success of our TANF parents. As part of the District's TANF redesign, vendors have been contracted to provide employment services, an effort in which the District has invested tens of millions of dollars. I have visited six of the seven TANF Employment Program vendors, and all six report that housing instability is the biggest barrier to regular program participation and to securing employment for their clients. The client then gets sanctioned for being unable to meet the obligations of their Individual Responsibility Plan. Jennifer Tiller from America Works reports [I have] "...noticed most sanction requests are for individuals dually enrolled (America Works/Virginia Williams Family Resource Center). It's so frustrating that our emails and calls [to FRC] go unanswered for indefinite amounts of time. The participant ends up being removed from the vendor so they lose potentially life-altering support including employment." These clients have been recommended for sanction for lack of participation, meaning their already insufficient TANF benefits could also be reduced. The other vendors report similar experiences with the Family Resource Center (FRC). Vendors have a list of about twenty-five FRC staffers they can contact about clients who are experiencing homelessness. Even after contacting the entire list, they have not received a response. One vendor has a client who is doubled up in a location that makes it impossible for her to coordinate her child's school schedule with her work schedule. The client has found an apartment that she can sustain on her own but needs assistance with the security deposit. However, Emergency Rental Assistance Program funding had not been given to the distributing agencies, so the client was unable to access ERAP. The vendor did not know that some Councilmembers offer assistance through constituent services funds.

Vendors understand the FRC has limited resources outside of hypothermia season but would like guidance on other possible avenues for help for their clients. DCFPI asks that DHS include information on how TANF vendors can secure FRC assistance for homeless clients both during and outside of hypothermia in its forthcoming FRC procedures manual.

In conclusion, DCFPI urges the Department to ensure that families can access emergency shelter when they need it regardless of the weather. This will ensure that parents can fully participate in TANF employment services and make progress towards employment and self-sufficiency.

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