



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog  
[www.dcfpi.org](http://www.dcfpi.org)

February 28, 2014

## Recreation Centers Do Not Provide the Safety and Stability Homeless Families Need

By Kate Coventry and Jenny Reed

Using recreation centers as emergency shelter for homeless families is a new and controversial approach by the Gray administration. Concerns [have been raised](#) that this does not adequately protect the safety of families with children and that it might violate District law. Instead of the putting energy into improving recreation center shelters, the city would be wiser to put its resources into placing families in safer shelter for a short period and then quickly into stable housing — which would open space up for newly homeless families.

There is reason for the legal concerns. Earlier this week, a DC administrative law judge ruled that the way DC has sheltered families in recreation centers [violated](#) DC law, because it placed the safety and privacy of families at risk. In response to the ruling, DC said it had purchased new partitions to address privacy concerns. The judge said that families could bring the case back if they felt the new partitions were not sufficient.

Beyond privacy, use of recreation centers as homeless shelter raises several concerns:

- **Families may not stay in shelter at recreation centers when temperatures are above 32 degrees.** This means that a family might be placed at a rec center one night but be expected to leave the next. This is very different from families placed in DC General or motels, who are allowed to stay until safe and stable housing has been identified, regardless of the temperature.
- **Families must re-apply for shelter every single day it is below 32 degrees.** Families in recreation centers must go through a lengthy screening and intake process every hypothermic night in order to go back into shelter. It is hard to imagine how parents are able to hold down a job or how kids can do well in school when the family has to pack up its belongings daily and go re-apply for shelter at the city's family intake center.
- **A lack of private space.** Even if new partitions are in place, it is difficult to conduct the daily tasks of family life living in a cubicle-like environment. For example, it is hard to get a toddler to sleep when overhead lights are on until almost midnight. Also, the new partitions may not include doors to prevent others from coming in and they are likely to let in noise and light from above.

Students who move more frequently do worse in school than other students and often have a hard time getting to school, according to research studies. Research also has found that children under age 3 who have made two or more moves in the past year were more likely to be food insecure, in fair or poor health, at risk of developmental delays, or seriously underweight compared to their stably housed peers.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the interest of both families and the city to create stable environments that help homeless families get back on their feet. Recreation centers will not do that. Instead urgency should be placed on more safe and stable shelter arrangements and moving families quickly into housing of their own with supportive services.

---

<sup>1</sup> Children's Healthwatch Policy Action Brief. *Overcrowding and Frequent Moves Undermine Children's Health*. November 2011. [www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/CrowdingMultipleMoves\\_brief\\_November2011.pdf](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/CrowdingMultipleMoves_brief_November2011.pdf)