

TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At the Public Oversight Roundtable on
Shelter Provisions for Homeless Families during the 2013-2014 Hypothermia Season
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services
February 3, 2014

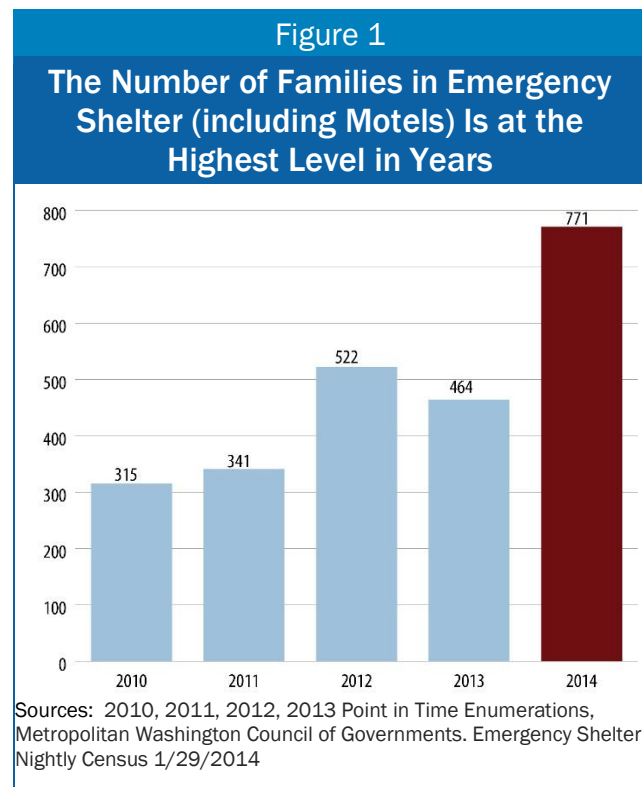
Chairman Graham and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

As you know, the District is on track to have twice as many homeless families this year than last. Addressing this crisis requires immediate steps to move as many families out of shelter as possible before the start of next hypothermia season.

The problem we face this year is partly due to the fact that shelters were nearly at capacity at the start of this hypothermia season. Medium-term steps also need to be explored, such as greater efforts to prevent homelessness and to address the special needs of youth-headed families.

A group of family housing providers and advocates, including DCFPI, has developed a plan of action, with input from the Department of Human Services (DHS) and The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP). That plan calls for steps to identify housing placements more quickly, adding staff capacity, and increasing financial resources for each of the city's homeless services tools. The plan also calls for creation of a new ad hoc committee of the Interagency Council to monitor and report on progress frequently.

The Gray administration, with support from the DC Council, needs to adopt this plan, or develop its own plan, and then move assertively to implement it. The best developed plan will not succeed



without leadership, focus, and a sense of urgency. The administration did not create the homeless crisis, but it alone has the tools to resolve the crisis.

The District has seen a dramatic rise in the number of homeless families in the past five years, but a particular jump this year. (See **Figure 1**.) The evening of this year's Point in Time homeless count, last Wednesday, 771 families were sheltered, the majority in motel rooms as the need outstripped the District's shelter capacity.¹ Families have had to be placed in motels in Maryland because the District ran out of low-cost hotel rooms. Now that families can no longer be placed in Maryland, due to concerns raised by Maryland officials, families seeking shelter are being placed in DC recreation centers.

The scale of this increase was not anticipated. The Interagency Council on Homelessness Winter Plan projected 509 family shelter placements during this hypothermia season, yet more than 600 families have already been placed with two months of hypothermia ahead of us. DHS now projects that 1,000 families will be sheltered by April 1st.

The District's ability to shelter these families was hampered by the large number of families in shelter at the start of the season. On October 1st, before any FY 2014 hypothermia placements had been made, 297 families were sheltered.² Thus the District had to place families in motels shortly after the season started.

The District should act immediately to address the current crisis and take steps to prevent the FY 2015 hypothermia season from being a repeat of this year. The plan that DCFPI developed with other advocates and providers calls for four immediate steps.

- **Speed up the housing placement process.** This requires improving landlord outreach and offering one-time incentives for landlords. The District also needs to expand its capacity to inspect housing units and bring them on-line more quickly by adding more housing inspectors at TCP or utilizing inspectors employed by providers. We suggest that the District increase its capacity and resources to be able make at least 100 housing placements per month, an increase from the current rate of 60 per month.
- **Build staff capacity, particularly around the rapid re-housing program.** The District aims to serve about 80 percent of homeless families with this program, but there are no dedicated staff at either TCP or DHS to run the rapid re-housing program.
- **Ensure that funding is available immediately to help move families out of shelter.** Funding for the three primary homeless services programs is likely inadequate to assist the current number of families facing homelessness: Emergency Rental Assistance (ERAP), Rapid Re-housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).
- **Create a Family Crisis Response Committee.** Representatives from DHS, TCP, family providers, and advocates will need to come together to monitor progress and troubleshoot delays in implementation. This Committee should report back to the community on progress at least monthly.

DCFPI urges the Council to ensure that DHS has sufficient funding so that other critical programs, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) job preparation services and shelter for

¹ Emergency Nightly Census 1/29/2014

² Emergency Nightly Census 10/1/2013

single adults, do not suffer cuts. DHS could not have anticipated, and thus budgeted for, such a huge increase in homeless families and the District has ample surplus funds to help DHS address this crisis.

The plan that advocates and providers have developed also lays out medium-term steps to be addressed in the next six to nine months which will both help the current crisis and help DC prepare for next year's hypothermia season. These steps require further research on best practice and community input through the Interagency Council on Homelessness. These steps include:

- Improving prevention and diversion programs to help families avoid the need for emergency shelter.
- Developing strategies to address the needs of youth-headed households, including timing, type, and amount of housing and social service supports. Between 30 and 40 percent of families in emergency shelter are headed by a parent aged eighteen to twenty-four. Most of these youth have never had their own home and may need particular supports to maintain their own housing.
- Ensuring that resources are available year-round to families to address homelessness when it happens. This will reduce the need for more costly interventions and services for families who have protracted episodes of homelessness. Additionally, the homeless services system is overwhelmed each year by the large number of families entering all at once at the start of hypothermia season.

Finally, the District needs to continue to invest in all of our affordable housing tools, including the Housing Production Trust Fund, Local Rent Supplement Program, and Permanent Supportive Housing, so that families do not become homeless.

In conclusion, DCFPI urges the District to take immediate steps to move families into housing as quickly as possible and ensure that incoming families are not placed into recreation centers, settings that do not provide the stability needed so parents can maintain employment or participate fully with their TANF employment services.

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

Plan to Address the Family Shelter Crisis of 2014

A working group of the Strategic Planning Committee of the Interagency Council on Homelessness – including advocates, providers, and government representatives – met to develop a shared strategy and language to address the unprecedented number of families currently at DC General and motels. This document reflects the best thinking and consensus of the group. We hope it will be used as a reference document to continue a community conversation and build further consensus about the most effective way to help families exit homelessness. Note that cost estimates in this plan are based on estimates from advocates and providers. A gap analysis still needs to be done to identify the estimated cost minus the resources that are already in the budget.

Overview: Goal for the System

The community has been working towards a transformed system for families experiencing homelessness that:

- a. Prevents homelessness and increases housing stability for very low-income families through a TANF unified case plan and increased availability of housing assistance expertise and resources throughout the TANF delivery system.
- b. Prevents and diverts families at imminent risk of homelessness through mediation and emergency assistance through the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center, including targeting Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) resources to those who would otherwise become homeless using a predictive model.
- c. Uses a uniform assessment (F-SPDAT) across the family homeless services system to ensure families get the appropriate level of assistance to end their homeless episode and that the system is informed by consistent data.
- d. Assesses and identifies the appropriate housing plan and resources for families placed in emergency shelter within two weeks of placement, with the goal of exiting within 30 days of placement. Housing options may include returning to live with a family member or friend, one-time assistance, rapid re-housing (RRH), transitional housing, affordable housing, permanent supportive housing (PSH), and any other affordable housing resource available.
- e. Assures that the range of resources and options are available year-round to address homelessness when it happens and to prevent the need for more costly interventions and services for families who have protracted episodes of homelessness.
- f. Provides training and technical assistance for staff across the homeless family system in order to provide a high-quality unified framework to supporting families at risk of or experiencing homelessness and which is informed by data and provider and customer experience.

It was agreed that the plan to address the current crisis in family shelter should support the continued development of this new system.

Short-term Steps To Address Urgency of Situation

1. **Identify affordable apartments in a more timely manner for families experiencing homelessness.**
 - a. Increase resources for staff to identify more affordable housing options and lower-income market-rate housing (for both RRH and PSH).

- b. Develop strategies to identify more landlords, including communicating with landlords currently working within the homelessness assistance system, and engaging new landlords to bring more units into the system.
- c. Consider one-time incentives for landlords as a means to secure more units, quickly. Do not offer incentives like a higher monthly rent payment which will leave families with a higher burden upon program exit and will artificially inflate area rents.
- d. Expand capacity to inspect housing units and bring them on-line more quickly by adding more housing inspectors at TCP or utilizing inspectors employed by providers.

Total Approximate Cost: \$323,000

- 2. Make funds available to assist families in exiting homelessness, including prevention, one-time assistance, rapid rehousing, and PSH.** (Note: Percentages below are based on scores from more than 500 families assessed in 2013 using F-SPDAT.)
- a. ERAP assistance to finance one-time assistance slots for families needing only security deposit, first month's rent, and assistance identifying units (approximately 10% of family homeless population).
 - b. Rapid rehousing assistance for between 4 months and 12 months, for those families needing short- to medium-term financial assistance, as well as help identifying a long-term affordable unit, services related to housing stability, and employment services to find a job and/or increase income (up to 80% of family homeless population).
 - c. Additional PSH assistance (permanent subsidies and permanent supportive services) for those families experiencing homelessness who are the most vulnerable, are disabled, and have not been able to succeed with other, lighter interventions (approximately 10% of family homeless population).
 - d. Assess families in transitional housing and move families into the appropriate housing option, including PSH, backfilling the transitional units with families from DC General and motels.
 - e. Backfill PSHP, RRH, and transitional housing units as they become available from the DC General and motel families.

Total approximate cost: \$28,100,000. Note: Estimate based on 1,000 families. For comparison, cost for 1,000 families in motels or shelter for twelve months at \$150/night is \$54,750,000.

- 3. Build infrastructure to implement system change.**
- a. All families entering shelter or hotel should be assessed using F-SPDAT within 2 weeks. Once assessments are completed, families get matched with a provider and housing assistance in third week of stay at DC General or motels. Set new standard that no family should be at DC General or other shelter for more than 60 days, and most should be housed within 30.
 - b. Ensure that all families, once housed, have access to employment services.
 - c. Hire approximately three additional staff to provide oversight of the family system, manage the rapid rehousing program, and ensure proper tracking and monitoring.
 - d. Ongoing training for staff on progressive engagement which is the philosophy of providing the minimum amount of assistance necessary to families in order to serve more families; increase services and assistance only as proven necessary.

Total approximate cost: \$350,000

Implementation Next Steps – a Family Crisis Response Committee

- Structure - Under the purview of the ICH Operations and Logistics Committee with representatives from DHS, The Community Partnership, family providers, and advocates.
- Focus on families in DC General and motels, looking at:
 - Housing Exit Tracking Tool (which has already been developed and identifies the status of each family and who is responsible for taking a lead at each step of the process) - Discuss what is working and not working and track number of exits per week. Goal has been 60 exits per month. Need to increase significantly to have families move before the end of hypothermia season.
 - Housing Inventory – Develop a larger inventory, streamline the process, ensure timely inspections.
 - Rapid Rehousing Work Group – Look at training for providers, management of the program, establishing standards, developing outcome measurements, monitoring quality.
- Communications/ Operations Oversight
 - Daily call for priority setting and updates
 - Weekly meetings and reports
 - Troubleshoot delays in implementation with authority and direct access to Director David Berns for decisions or if there are roadblocks.
 - Report back to the community at least monthly.

Medium-Term Steps

There was agreement on the following system issues that need to be addressed in the medium-term (six to nine months) in order to prevent a similar situation in the future. There was not agreement on what the plan should be for each one, though, so there needs to be further research on best practices, and a community conversation through the Interagency Council on Homelessness to reach consensus.

1. Provide a greater emphasis on prevention and diversion, including looking at how to make ERAP more effective. There was not agreement at this time on how ERAP should be changed.
2. Have a community conversation about how best to use Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) funds and other affordable housing subsidies in light of the huge need for affordable housing in the city for many different populations. It was agreed that LRSP funds should not be tied directly to families living in DC General or motels, as it may be unintentionally incentivizing families to enter shelter. However, people felt that LRSP and other affordable housing supports should be available and should indirectly help families who struggle simply with affordability.
3. Look at how to make services available year-round to families who experience homelessness. There was not agreement on how to achieve that goal but ideas included ways to provide more prevention and diversion as well a focus on system flow.
4. Develop strategies to address the needs of youth-headed households, including timing, type, and amount of housing and social service supports.

Long-Term Steps

There was consensus that the unprecedented number of families in shelter is a result of the larger challenges of poverty and the shortage of affordable housing in the District, and that the problem cannot be solved by the Department of Human Services alone. Other agencies within the District

government must be involved in addressing issues such as affordable housing, employment and training, education, coordination between agencies, and supports for low-income families.

Appendix 1 – Details for Cost Analysis

Shelter versus Housing Options

Note: This analysis does not take into account the funds already budgeted for in DHS or other budgets. With that information, it would be possible to determine the gap in funding. These numbers assume a 12 month period for 1,000 families, crossing District fiscal years.

Assumptions			
Number of families in motels and DC General by April 1	1,000		
% assessing for one time assistance	10%	100	
% assessing for rapid rehousing	80%	800	
% assessing for PSH	10%	100	
BUDGET FOR SHORT-TERM PLAN			
<i>1. Find more affordable apartments.</i>			
Housing Specialists	\$ 165,000	Estimate for 3 FTEs.	
Benefits	\$ 33,000		
Funds for inspections	\$ 125,000	\$125 per unit.	
Subtotal	\$ 323,000		
<i>2. Housing subsidies and support services</i>			
ERAP for one-time assistance	\$ 500,000	Assumes \$5,000 for one time assistance.	
Rapid Re-housing	\$ 24,000,000	Assumes \$2,500 per month for 12 months. New families added as families rotate off.	
Permanent supportive housing	\$ 3,600,000	Assumes \$3,000 per month. Multi-year commitment.	
Subtotal	\$ 28,100,000		
<i>3. Build staff Infrastructure</i>			
3 FTEs plus training	\$ 350,000	Estimate	
Total	\$ 28,773,000		

VERSUS

Cost for Families to stay in Shelter	\$ 54,750,000	1000 families in shelter for 365 days per year at \$150/day
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