



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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With Rec Centers Eliminated as Shelter Option, DC Needs to Re-Double Efforts to Address Family Homelessness

By Kate Coventry and Jenny Reed

Yesterday [a Superior Court judge ruled](#) that the Gray administration's use of city recreation centers as [emergency shelter](#) violates DC law, and he ordered the [city to place families](#) in appropriate facilities. How DC reacts to this ruling over the next few days – and how it prepares over the next six months for next winter – is important.

The city, which argues it [does not have space](#) beyond rec centers, could simply remove families from shelter as the weather warms. That's because the right to shelter applies only to cold nights. Yet leaving families with no safe and stable place to go would be bad not only for them but for the city as a whole. The de-stabilizing impacts of homelessness make it hard for parents to get back on their feet and hard for children to succeed in school. Failure to help families also would likely result in a repeat of this year's crisis next winter.

Instead, the city could place families in stable shelter, provide services to address the problems that led to homelessness, and allow them to stay in shelter until they help the family secure housing – undoing the harmful effects of homelessness as quickly as possible.

It is important to remember how DC got to the point of using recreation centers. Because the main emergency shelter—the rundown former DC General Hospital —was [at capacity early in the winter season](#), the city began to place homeless families in low-cost motel rooms. After concerns were raised about motel placements in Maryland, [DC began to turn to recreation centers](#).

Yet, yesterday, a Superior Court judge issued [an injunction](#) against using rec centers, noting the irreparable harm that would be caused to the families if they continued to stay in recreation centers. The rec center [problems](#) include flimsy partitions that do not provide privacy, sleeping spaces without doors, lights that are often kept on all night, and until recently, no access to showers.

Beyond these conditions, families in rec centers have been [treated differently](#) from other families, such as having to reapply for shelter every day and being forced to leave shelter when temperatures are not below 32 degrees.

While the reasons for the surge in family homelessness are not entirely clear, the disappearance of low-cost housing is no doubt a major cause. The problem of homelessness will not go away by turning families out of shelter this spring.

Instead, the District should work to reduce the traumatizing effects of homelessness by giving families safe and stable shelter as envisioned in the law – including a private room the family can stay in until housing is found.

In addition, the Gray Administration should take steps to ensure that this year’s problem is not repeated next winter. Over the next six months, DC needs to continue efforts to improve the family homelessness system and reduce the number of families in shelter. By October 1, DC should have better prevention and diversion tools in place, as well as processes to help more families quickly move into supportive housing with services.

With over 1,400 homeless children this year, developing long-term solutions is critical to the future for a large share of our young population.

Stay tuned to the District’s Dime for ways that DC can improve its family homelessness programs to get ready for the next wave of families in need of help.