



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Let's Make Sure Homeless Families Have Access to Safe and Decent Shelter

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Today, the DC Council will hear testimony from the community, [including DCFPI](#), on the “Dignity for Homeless Families Amendment Act of 2014.” This bill would clarify that families who are homeless must be sheltered in apartments or private rooms and was introduced after the District began placing homeless moms, dads and kids in recreation centers this past winter. Two superior court judges found the placement of homeless families in recreation centers a violation of the law and that they posed irreparable harm to children.

Given the negative effects of chaotic environments and residential instability on children, DCFPI strongly supports this bill. We also recommend that the Council add an amendment to ensure families would not only be safely sheltered, but *continuously* sheltered until they find suitable alternative housing.

With a huge spike in the number of families seeking shelter this winter, the District began placing homeless families seeking shelter into recreation centers after the city's main family homeless shelter and low-cost motels were largely full. But there were a lot of problems with the way the District set up the recreation centers as shelters. Families couldn't get in until after 9 p.m. and had to leave by 7 a.m. They were not allowed, until the DC Council intervened, to use shower facilities. Lights were left on all night and families had flimsy partition screens that did little to block out light, noise and most importantly, strangers. Two superior court judges ruled that the placements were a violation of the law and that they posed significant risks of harm to children.

At the same time, the District started sheltering families for just one night at a time and only on hypothermic nights, ending the long standing practice of sheltering families until they found alternative housing. Families were forced to reapply for shelter each day, which interfered with their ability to fully participate in their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) employment preparation activities: work, look for work, and search for housing.

[Research](#) has found that chaotic environments—characterized by noise, crowding, lack of routine, and unplanned changes—can lead to poor cognitive functioning and increased behavioral problems



in children. Sheltering families in apartments, or private rooms as defined by this legislation, can help mitigate or eliminate these factors, allowing families space and privacy to maintain family routines and shut out noise and strangers. Additionally [a number of studies](#) have found that housing instability and frequent moves can lead to poor academic performance as well as emotional and behavioral problems in children. Adding an amendment that ensures that families have continuous access to safe and decent shelter, without having to reapply daily, will reduce instability and allow parents to focus on the activities they need to regain housing and stability in their lives.

To see the entire testimony, click [here](#).