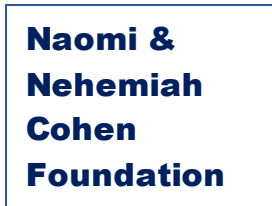




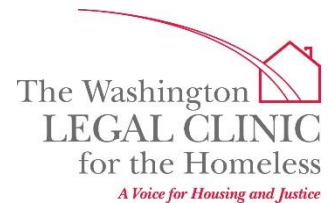
**Helping Families Home Roadmap:  
*A Report Card on DC's Progress in  
 Helping Homeless Families***



Mary's  
Center



Washington Interfaith Network





## **HELPING FAMILIES HOME ROADMAP: A REPORT CARD ON DC'S PROGRESS IN HELPING HOMELESS FAMILIES**

The District has made improvements to services for homeless families in response to the crisis that occurred last winter, but progress has been uneven and large gaps remain. In April 2014, twenty-five organizations released a community plan – *Helping Families Home: A Roadmap for the District* – outlining their recommendations on what DC should do immediately to start on a path towards a high-quality homeless services system.<sup>1</sup> This report provides a six-month update on progress toward the community's recommendations as laid out in the *Roadmap*.

There has been progress in some important areas: a new homelessness prevention program is set to be launched this winter, there are new investments in affordable housing for families, and the District is securing additional shelter capacity for this winter. The District has released a plan for a new system of smaller shelters to replace the DC General Family Shelter, but it is not clear if this plan will yield enough shelter capacity to meet the need.

Yet there has been a tremendous lack of progress in several key areas. Many of the problems with DC's Rapid Re-housing program — the main tool for getting families out of shelter — have not been addressed. Little progress has been made to meet the unique needs of youth-headed households, which make up nearly half of all families seeking shelter. The DC General Family Shelter has received only some of the improved case management and services it needs. Also, the District is planning to fill the gap in the homeless services budget by using Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding, and it is not clear whether this will lead to cuts in other vital programs. Finally, DC has made little progress towards the goal of providing access to shelter year-round.

This report card finds that a great deal of work needs to be done — soon — to avoid a repeat of last winter's family homeless crisis. The end of the report includes our recommendations for the key areas that DC should focus on over the next six months. These include: finalizing a plan for a new shelter system with sufficient numbers of units, strengthening Rapid Re-housing, further improving

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.dcfpi.org/helping-families-home-a-roadmap-for-the-district>

conditions at DC General, speeding up the exits from shelter, and creating additional affordable housing for families.

### Grading the District Government's Progress

This report card reviews and grades progress toward the 10 *Roadmap* goals that are needed to build a high-quality homeless services system. The grading system is as follows:

- **A:** The goal has been substantially fulfilled.
- **B:** The District is making progress toward the goal.
- **C:** The District is taking steps, but it is too soon to determine if they will result in significant progress.
- **D:** There has been no significant progress made toward the goal.
- **F:** There has been no progress made at all toward the goal.

Table 1	
Progress on Goals for Improving DC's Family Homelessness System	
Goal	Grade
Goal 1: All Families Currently in Shelter Should Be Moved Into Safe Housing Before November 1 <sup>st</sup> .	C
Goal 2: Specific improvements in Case Management and Services at Virginia Williams Family Resource Center and DC General.	D
Goal 3: Develop new and strengthen existing prevention and diversion efforts.	B
Goal 4: Explore ways to improve assistance for youth-headed households.	C
Goal 5: Shelter all families safely until alternative housing can be identified. <sup>2</sup>	C
Goal 6: Ensure DHS has sufficient resources to deploy any of its tools to end a family's homelessness in a timely manner.	C
Goal 7: Strengthen Rapid Re-housing.	C
Goal 8: Better data reporting on performance measures, budgeting and planning, and spending.	D
Goal 9: Create affordable housing that meets families' needs.	C
Goal 10: Plan for new family homeless shelters in DC.	C

<sup>2</sup> This goal is intended to address the problems of the District using recreation center placements for homeless families last winter and for placing families for just one night at a time and only during hypothermic weather.

## **Goal 1: All Families Currently in Shelter Should Be Moved Into Safe Housing Before November 1st. C**

The *Roadmap* recommended moving all families out of shelter before the start of the 2014-15 winter hypothermia season, to improve the capacity to absorb incoming families. Yet as of November 1st, the first day of hypothermia season, the District still had 187 families in emergency shelter, nearly the same number as this time last year.<sup>3</sup> This means the city will have to find alternative places to shelter families almost immediately after cold weather hits.

To achieve this goal, **the District needed to move 100 families from shelter per month.** Through the *500 Families, 100 Days*, the Department of Human Services (DHS) was able to increase the exit rate from 46 in May to 63 in August and has been able to maintain that exit rate through the fall. But DHS needs to build upon the lessons learned during that initiative to bring exits to the level needed to keep pace with incoming families. One positive step is the development of a universal tracking tool that outlines the shelter exit process for each family and the steps assigned to each staff member or provider.

One reason the District has not met this goal is that it has **only partially built sufficient capacity in the Rapid Re-housing program (RRH).** RRH is the main program to move families out of shelter. DHS did hire a program manager in April 2014, yet it still does not have the three additional staff it stated that it needs for the program to run smoothly. On a positive note, as of spring 2014, DHS has indicated that the Community Partnership for Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), the largest provider of homeless services and the operator of the DC General Family Shelter, now has two staff focused on the Rapid Re-Housing program. A Rapid Re-housing Learning Collaborative for providers did not start until the end of September.

Another key step to moving families from shelter is to **use all available resources to move families into permanent supportive housing (PSH).** Some homeless families face serious enough problems to need the intensive services provided through PSH. Yet it took DHS eight months to place any families in new PSH slots in FY 2014, in part because of contracting delays. It is not clear whether the District can place families more quickly this year.

## **Goal 2: Specific Improvements in Case Management and Services at Virginia Williams Family Resource Center and DC General. D**

The *Roadmap* recommended several improvements to the DC General Shelter, which will need to be used for at least 12 months until a replacement shelter system is ready. The progress in this area has been minimal.

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<sup>3</sup> Emergency Shelter Nightly Census 11/1/2014. The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.

The DC Council allocated \$600,000 to add **case managers to address the needs of children living at DC General**, as recommended in the *Roadmap*. It will be important for the District to hire for these positions as soon as possible.

**The District has provided trauma-informed care training to some staff at DC General but we feel strongly that *all* staff should be required to participate in training** in light of Relisha Rudd’s abduction. Trauma-informed care is an evidence-based practice that teaches service providers about the vulnerabilities of trauma survivors so that providers can provide services effectively and avoid re-traumatization. Another area of progress is that the District provided sex trafficking awareness training for DC General staff and had a safety audit of the building performed.

The District has not implemented the *Roadmap* recommendation that **unused space on the lobby level of DC General should be made available to nonprofits to provide play space and family programming**. Providers have secured private funding to make any needed improvements and just need the District to make the rooms available. But DC still has not done this.

**The District has not implemented the recommendation to release information on case management and services at both DC General and Virginia Williams Family Resources Center**. Providing data on what kind of case management and outside referrals DC General families receive would help in identifying possible gaps in assistance for homeless families. Yet there continues to be little available information on what families can receive. Virginia Williams Resource Center staff have no written protocol outlining how to determine a family’s eligibility for shelter. Publishing a protocol of operations would improve the transparency of the intake and screening process and ensure that all staff are determining eligibility in the same way. One area of progress is that the District has implemented Quality Assurance Procedures to monitor case management at DC General.

One area of progress is that the **playground at DC General** is now open.

DHS has also made significant progress in areas not outlined in the *Roadmap* but that we greatly support. One is **more coordination of services at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center**. Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and Child and Family Services (CFSA) are now available to provide direct assistance to families who need it at Virginia Williams. DHS is also **working with domestic violence providers to place specialized staff at the Virginia Williams**

**Key Programs the Department of Human Services Can Utilize to Help Exit Families from Homelessness:**

**Emergency Rental Assistance:** ERAP offers one-time assistance for a security deposit and first month’s rent, or can help pay rent in arrears if a family is facing an eviction.

**Rapid Re-housing:** RRH offers rental assistance and case management services for up to four months. Assistance can be extended by additional four month periods for up to 12 months, or longer in some instances.

**Permanent Supportive Housing:** PSH offers case management services and rental assistance permanently. PSH is designed for chronically homeless residents or those who face severe barriers to housing stability.

**Local Rent Supplement Program:** LRSP offers rental assistance for families with very low-incomes.

**Family Resource Center and DC General Family Shelter** to better meet the needs of these very vulnerable families

Another area of progress not outlined in the *Roadmap* but that we greatly support is that DC has implemented nightly bed checks to ensure that all children who are supposed to be staying at DC General are there each evening. Children can still leave the shelter to spend nights with family or friends but now paperwork must be submitted so staff can ensure that all children are accounted for. Lastly, the District has taken the important step of providing current shelter staff with access to the Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLED), allowing them to monitor school attendance in real time.

### **Goal 3: Develop new and strengthen existing prevention and diversion efforts. B**

One of the most important solutions to homelessness is to help families avoid going into shelter, through emergency financial assistance and by connecting families with friends or relatives able to share housing. The District has made progress on the *Roadmap* recommendations in this area.

The District is expected to launch a **new homelessness prevention program** this winter, modeled after successful programs in New York City and Massachusetts, using \$2 million allocated by the DC Council. DHS will partner with two community-based organizations to provide services at their locations to make it easier for families to access services. DHS is looking to partner with three more organizations. It is critical that this program is up and running as quickly as possible in order to have any impact on the 2014-2015 hypothermia season. As of the *Report Card* release, the program was not up and running.

The District has begun efforts to create a **new mediation center** to help families reconnect with relatives and friends, while avoiding situations that pose a risk to health or safety. The program will not launch by November 1<sup>st</sup> as recommended, but the District has scheduled training with staff from a successful program, the Cleveland Mediation Center, and is working on a staffing plan.

### **Goal 4: Explore ways to improve assistance for youth-headed households. C**

The District has made some recent progress in this important area. Nearly 43 percent of families who entered shelter last winter are headed by a parent aged 24 or younger, many of whom lack a high school diploma or GED, have limited work experience, and have never had their own home.

The *Roadmap* recommended a **special focus on youth-headed households**, including how they fare in DC's key homeless services programs. We also recommended a review of the District's assessment tool and case management services to make sure they are sensitive to the special circumstances of young families. Some communities have found that youth-headed households are less likely to succeed in Rapid Re-housing than other families and are experimenting with program changes to better meet the needs of youth.<sup>4</sup> The District has launched a small pilot program providing more intensive services and allowing youth headed households to receive assistance for

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<sup>4</sup> Gail Dorfman, Executive Director of St. Stephen's Human Services, Minneapolis, MN, presentation at Tackling Advanced Issues in Rapid Re-Housing, National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014 Conference Session 5.7.



longer periods of time. Currently, the program can serve up to 38 youth. It is not clear if the District will have the capacity to bring this project to scale as it depends on providers having unused space that they can contribute to the effort. It also is not clear if the assessment tools and case management services provided to other youth parents have been reviewed to ensure they incorporate youth development principles.

### **Goal 5: Shelter all families safely until alternative housing can be identified. C**

The *Roadmap* recommended that all homeless families be placed in safe and decent shelter — shelter that affords the family privacy and security. It also recommended that once families enter the shelter system, they be allowed to remain until they find suitable housing. Progress in this area is modest and uncertain.

These recommendations reflect the fact that the District placed some families in recreation centers last winter, rather than in apartments or private rooms. Additionally, the District sheltered some families for just one night at a time and required them to reapply for shelter each day.

Very modest progress has been made on ensuring **all families are placed in decent shelter**. Two courts have issued preliminary decisions that use of recreation centers poses significant risks of harm to children and is a violation of the Homeless Services Reform Act. But the District is challenging these decisions in court. In response, members of the DC Council passed legislation in November 2014, the *Dignity for Homeless Families Amendment Act*, which clarifies the kind of private room that is suitable as family shelter and allows families to remain in shelter until they find safe housing. But this legislation will not go into effect unless funding is allocated to do so.

The District has **identified a plan and funding to shelter all families in private rooms this winter**. But this funding is from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) budget, and it is not clear whether this will lead to cuts in other vital programs for low income families. The District should instead identify funding outside of the Department of Human Services budget to ensure services will not need to be cut.

Very importantly, the District has made no progress towards allowing newly homeless families with no safe options to access emergency shelter during the spring, summer and fall and on non-hypothermic days during the winter. As a consequence, dozens of families are forced to wait months in unsafe places, including their cars and parks, before they can access the emergency services they need to be safe and re-stabilize.

### **Goal 6: Ensure DHS has sufficient resources to deploy any of its tools to end a family's homelessness in a timely manner. C**

The *Roadmap* recommended that the District allocate sufficient resources for the key tools to keep families out of shelter. The Department of Human Services reports that it has sufficient resources, but it is not clear that they will be able to quickly contract with providers so that families entering shelter are able to exit quickly. A problem with permanent supportive housing (PSH) contracts in fiscal year 2014 meant that families were stuck in shelter for months. Additionally, as noted above some funding is coming from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) budget, and it is not clear whether this will lead to cuts in other vital programs for low income families.

## Goal 7: Strengthen Rapid Re-housing. C

The *Roadmap* made several recommendations for strengthening Rapid Re-housing (RRH), but the District has made only modest progress. RRH provides a minimum of four months of rental assistance and supportive services, which can be renewed for up to 12 months, or longer in some instances. Yet, concerns still remain that the program lacks proper protections for families, performance data, and consistent implementation.

On the positive side, the District is now offering **intensive training to Rapid Re-housing providers**. The District contracted with the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) to lead training and a learning collaborative for providers. This effort began in September. The District has also launched a Rapid Re-housing Provider Task Force to develop a case management model, recertification process, and materials for participants.

The District has also made some improvements in how families receive information about the program. Shelter case managers now have a meeting with each family and provide orientation materials.

However, **DHS has not finalized Rapid Re-housing regulations to ensure proper protections are in place for families**. The regulations address important details such as the share of income a family will pay toward rent and the length of the program subsidy. It is important that families are not required to pay more than 40 percent of their income on rent and that the subsidy can be extended beyond 12 months if the family is not ready to exit.

**The District has not explored ways for families to easily reengage if they fall into trouble after leaving Rapid Re-housing**. DC should explore possibilities to allow providers to offer follow up case management and/or rental assistance.

**The District has not improved collection of program outcomes across providers**. DC does not produce consistent, reliable and timely data on Rapid Re-housing program outcomes, making it difficult to track where improvements might be needed.

## Goal 8: Better data reporting on performance measures, budgeting and planning, and spending. D

The *Roadmap* recommended that DC release data on the performance of the family homelessness system, such as average length of stay in shelter, number of families enrolled in Rapid Re-housing, where families are exiting from Rapid Re-housing or permanent supportive housing to, and spending on shelter and motels. The *Roadmap* also recommended that DHS identify the entity responsible for various parts of the family homelessness system, because DHS contracts out much of the homeless services to The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP). TCP does not provide public information on how their funds are spent, including performance data. Without this information, it is impossible to determine if the District has allocated sufficient funding to meet the need and if programs are performing as well as they should be.

Since the release of the *Roadmap* little progress has been made in this area. The only progress is that the District has released more consistent data on the number of families that have exited shelter



than they have previously done. **But much more data is needed, particularly about housing program performance and funding allocation.** The District is currently receiving technical assistance funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and plans to use this technical assistance to set performance standards. The District should also release budget information and outline how responsibilities are divided between DHS and its contractors.

### **Goal 9: Create affordable housing that meets families' needs. C**

The District has made some progress on the *Roadmap* recommendations to increase the supply of affordable housing. Efforts to move families out of shelter quickly need to be coupled with investments in long-term affordable housing. This will help prevent homelessness and make it easier for families to exit homelessness. The District has made some progress in this area over the last year, but larger investments in affordable housing will need to be made on a continuing basis to meet the need.

**The District should increase funding for tenant-based rental assistance.** The Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) makes homes affordable to residents with very low-incomes. The *Roadmap* recommended a FY 2015 investment of at least \$4 million to serve 266 families, and \$3 million was allocated in the budget. The District will need to make larger investments in LRSP in the coming years.

**The District needs to continue to target and increase production of affordable housing units that accommodate families.** The Department of Housing and Community Development awards funds to support the production of affordable housing, and it recently has established preferences for family-oriented units (for example, those with three or more bedrooms). This represents significant progress but more needs to be done to increase the number of family units in the affordable housing pipeline that will come online in the future.

### **Goal 10: Plan for new family homeless shelters in DC. C**

The *Roadmap* called for replacing the DC General Family Shelter, which is rundown, but this cannot happen until other emergency shelter is available to ensure families can be served year-round. Currently families are not placed into shelter on non-hypothermic nights, no matter how dire their circumstances. The FY 2015 budget includes \$500,000 to begin development of alternative family shelters. The Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services released a plan on October 14<sup>th</sup> to close DC General. Yet the plan lacks sufficient detail, including timelines for key decision-making, and it does not appear to call for enough shelter capacity to meet the hypothermia season need, let alone to return to the policy of ensuring that families with no safe place to stay can enter shelter year-round. In order for funding to be included in the FY 2016 budget, more work will need to happen to ensure DC has a sufficient plan in place.

## What the District Can Do To Improve Its Grades on Homeless Families Services

The District has made some progress towards creating a high-quality family homelessness system, but more work needs to be done. By taking immediate action on the following, the District will be on a good path to develop a high-quality family homelessness services system that can provide access to services year-round:

- **Release a detailed plan for new family homeless shelters and ensure these shelters include a sufficient number of units.** In order to close down DC General before the next hypothermia season, the District will need to include the necessary funding in the FY 2016 budget that will be adopted in the spring of 2015. The District needs to release a plan soon detailing the number of units to be leased, rehabilitated, and built and the costs of each. The current plan calls for only one-to-one replacement of the units at DC General but the District runs out of space at DC General every year. The plan should include sufficient capacity to meet the hypothermia season need as well as to return to the policy of ensuring families with no safe place to stay can enter shelter no matter the temperature.
- **Strengthen Rapid Re-housing.** DHS needs to finalize Rapid Re-housing regulations to ensure proper protections for families. The regulations address important details such as the share of income a family will pay toward rent and the length of the program subsidy. The District needs to explore ways for families to easily reengage if they fall into trouble after leaving Rapid Re-housing. In addition, the District needs to consider system-wide program changes to meet the special needs of youth-headed households, who may need additional assistance to be successful.

And DC needs to produce consistent, reliable and timely data on Rapid Re-housing outcomes, to make it possible to track where improvements might be needed.

- **Improve conditions at DC General Family Shelter.** DHS needs to hire licensed social workers -- authorized for fiscal year 2015, which started in October 2014 -- to meet the needs of children living at DC General and provide ongoing trauma-informed care training for all staff. The District should also make unused space on the lobby level available to nonprofits to provide play space and family programming.
- **Speed up exits from shelter.** The District needs to move 100 families out of shelter per month to keep pace with the number of families entering shelter. The current exit rate is 63 per month. The District needs to do a thorough review of the exit process to identify areas where improvements can be made. DHS also needs to ensure that it can quickly contract with providers to make sure that exit assistance is available all year. A problem with permanent supportive housing (PSH) contracts in fiscal year 2014 meant that families were stuck in shelter for months.
- **Create more affordable housing for families.** The FY 2016 budget needs to include an investment in the tenant-based Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) and a targeted

investment in the Housing Production Trust Fund, dedicated to building units large enough for families.