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Building a High-Quality Family Homelessness System Recommendations to the New Mayor and DC Council

Summary

A high-quality family homelessness system should provide access to shelter when it is needed and sufficient services to help families quickly move from shelter to a safe and stable home. Unfortunately, this District's homeless services system has not operated in this way in recent years, as evidenced by the family homelessness crisis during the unexpectedly harsh winter last year. Families have been able to enter shelter only when it is cold. Shelter conditions have been deplorable. And many families have not received the right services through the Rapid Re-housing program that they need to exit shelter quickly.

The number of families with children in emergency shelter, including motel rooms, has more than doubled in recent years, from 326 in 2011 to 907 families in 2014. No one knows exactly why this happened, but a clear factor is DC's uneven economic recovery that left many residents behind. Wages have fallen since 2008 for residents without a college degree. The unemployment rate for residents with a high school diploma is 20 percent, compared with 12 percent before the recession started. These worsening job realities and DC's increasing lack of affordable housing undoubtedly are the main contributors to the rise in family homelessness.

The following issue briefs make recommendations on the two areas that Mayor Bowser needs to address immediately to create a high-quality family homelessness system. By spring, the Interagency Council on Homelessness will have passed a strategic plan laying out the steps the District needs to take to end family homelessness.

- ❖ ***Provide Entry to Shelter When Families Need It, Year-Round.*** The District's primary shelter, DC General, is too large to manage successfully and is in deplorable condition, but it cannot be shut down until replacement shelters are secured, preferable through a set of smaller facilities. These plans can start with the FY 2016 budget that will be developed in the first half of 2015. These shelters should include enough units to allow access year-round to families with no safe place.
- ❖ ***Strengthen Rapid Re-housing to Better Serve Families.*** Rapid Re-housing (RRH), also known as the Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP), is DC's main tool to help families end their homelessness. Designed to help families quickly exit shelter, RRH

provides rental assistance and supportive services. Making changes to the program to incorporate national best practices would make RRH a more effective program.

Building a High-Quality Family Homelessness System

Recommendations to the New Mayor and DC Council

Issue #1: Create a New Family Shelter System

There is widespread agreement that the District needs to develop a new system to shelter homeless families. This should start with the fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget that will be developed in the first half of 2015.

The number of families with children in emergency shelter, including motel rooms, has more than doubled in recent years, from 326 in 2011 to 907 in 2014. This has overwhelmed DC's homeless services system. The approach in recent years has been to use DC General as the main family shelter and to lease motel rooms when DC General is full, yet this clearly is not working well. Conditions at DC General are deplorable, with frequent heat, hot water, and elevator outages. In addition, sheltering hundreds of families in one facility creates higher risks of safety issues, particularly as some families have left abusers who may come looking for them. It is also difficult for staff to effectively keep track of so many families and to ensure that the most vulnerable families are receiving the services they need. And relying on motels for a substantial share of shelter capacity is risky because motel space cannot be guaranteed every year.

Replacing DC General with a number of smaller shelters in better condition scattered throughout the District will help address these issues. A new shelter system should be designed to create stable environments for children. Housing instability, frequent moves, and chaotic environments can lead to poor academic performance as well as emotional and behavioral problems in children.¹ To increase stability, families should be able to enter shelter when they need it – rather than only in cold weather as is current practice – and to stay in shelter until a stable alternative is found. In addition, sheltering families in apartments or private rooms can help mitigate chaos, allowing families space and privacy to maintain family routines and shut out noise and strangers.

With this in mind, a new shelter system should include the following:

The shelter systems should have enough capacity. In the past few years, the District has sheltered families in motel rooms during hypothermia when the need for shelter outstrips available capacity. The availability of these rooms is subject to tourist demand, meaning the District cannot always secure enough rooms, such as during the popular Cherry Blossom season. The District should have enough capacity that it does not need to rely heavily on motel rooms.

Replacement capacity should be sufficient to allow families to enter shelter beyond cold-weather months and to stay in shelter until they find housing. DC law mandates that the District provide shelter during hypothermic conditions. But until recently, the District placed families regardless of the weather. Since 2011, however, in response to rising numbers of homeless

¹ Homeless Children: Update on Research, Policy, Programs, and Opportunities for the US Department of Health and Human Services. May 2010. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/10/homelesschildrenroundtable/index.shtml>

families, the District has only sporadically allowed families to enter shelter on non-hypothermic nights. Most families who become homeless in the summer are not allowed into shelter. These families often couch surf for months, meaning they move in with a different friend or family member every few days.

This constant moving is problematic for families, because it delays ability to seek solutions to their homelessness, and because it makes it difficult to get children to school and to hold down a job. It also is problematic for the District because it leads to a huge number of families seeking shelter as soon as cold weather arrives.

For these reasons, the new shelter system should be designed to allow families into shelter at any time in the year.

The District should ensure that it has adequate capacity to allow families to stay in shelter until they find alternative housing. This past winter, the District ended its long-standing practice to allow families to remain in shelter. Instead, some families were forced to reapply for shelter each day, which interfered with their ability to work, look for work, search for housing, and participate in job training.

The new shelter systems should include both city-owned and temporarily leased units. The shelter redevelopment plan proposed by the Gray administration in October 2014 recommends that the new family shelter system consist solely of leased units. While having some leased unit would give the District flexibility to reduce capacity in the future if the need decreases, a leasing-only approach is likely to create uncertainty about shelter capacity, since the District may not always be able to find enough space each year. It also would lead the city to rely on low-cost buildings in neighborhoods that are likely to be far from jobs or transit. By building shelter on city-owned land, the District can ensure that shelters are spread throughout the city and have the security of having a stock of shelter space that it controls.

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Recommendations to the New Mayor and DC Council

Issue #2: Strengthen Rapid Re-housing to Better Serve Families

The Rapid Re-housing Program (RRH), also known as the Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP), is the District's main tool for helping families exit shelter. It provides four months of rental assistance and supportive services, which can be renewed for up to 12 months, or longer in some instances. Rapid Re-housing moves families out of shelter quickly and into stable and less chaotic environments. This also allows more families to access emergency shelter using the same number of units.

Despite the centrality of RRH to the District's efforts to serve homeless families, the District's program faces a number of problem and in many ways does not follow recommended practices. Rapid Re-housing has operated under emergency regulations since its inception. The regulations address important details such as how much of one's income a family will pay toward rent and the length of the program subsidy. The District should take a number of steps as soon as possible to align the program with national best practices. These steps are:

Ensure families do not have to dedicate too much of their limited incomes to housing.

Currently families are required to pay as much as 50 percent of their income on housing while in Rapid Re-housing. This is far higher than the 30 percent threshold set for most federal low income housing programs and can create problems for families. Low-income families that spend half or more of their income on housing spend less on basics such as food, health care, and transportation than other low-income households.²

But there is also concern that families would face a steeper cliff at the end of the RRH subsidy if they go from paying 30 percent of their income to the full rent amount. Given this concern, we recommend the District cap the amount of income that families pay toward rent at 40 percent of income, with 10 percent of that funding going toward an escrow account that families can access to pay for necessities and emergency needs. Otherwise, we recommend that DC reduce the amount of income that families are required to pay to a maximum of 30 percent.

Assist families in locating housing. Currently, families must identify their own housing and are only assisted if these efforts have failed. Yet the federal government and the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) both recommend that Rapid Re-housing programs should "assist households to find and secure appropriate rental housing."³ This is needed to help families overcome barriers, such as negotiating with a landlord to overlook a poor credit and/or rental history and obtaining practical lease agreements that are manageable for the family. DCFPI

² Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, "The State of the Nation's Housing," 2011, http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/son2011_housing_challenges.pdf

³ Core Components of Rapid Re-Housing. Endorsed by US Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH), National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). <http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/RRH.pdf>

recommends that families be allowed to immediately choose a unit from the inventory of available apartments maintained by the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), receive individualized assistance if the units on the inventory do not meet their needs, in addition to identifying units on their own.

Tailor length of assistance. Under current regulations, RRH assistance is limited to a maximum of 12 months except in extraordinary circumstances. But NAEH recommends not using a hard time limit, arguing that programs must be “flexible enough to permit extensions if best efforts fail or another crisis occurs.”⁴ NAEH further argues that staff should judge progress within the context of client and environmental limitations, such as a lack of viable opportunities in the local job market or a relapse from sobriety. DCFPI recommends that the Department adopt this approach—individualizing the length of the subsidy to each client’s circumstances.

Explore ways for families to easily re-engage if they fall into trouble after exiting. Families may face challenges when Rapid Re-housing ends and they have to pay their housing costs entirely on their own. DC should explore possibilities to offer families follow up case management and/or rental assistance if needed. For example, in Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Rapid Re-housing program, clients are allowed to return to their provider for additional case management and rental assistance if they fall on hard times.

Hire additional staff to build capacity in the Rapid Re-housing program. RRH is the main program to move families out of shelter. Yet until recently, neither the District government nor the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), the nonprofit that oversee Rapid Re-housing, had any staff dedicated to it. A program manager started in mid-April at DHS, yet the agency states it needs three staff to build sufficient capacity, as well as staff at TCP to manage certain program aspects such as unit identification and the assignment of families to providers after their assessments.

Explore ways to improve assistance for youth-headed households. Nearly half of families who entered shelter last winter were headed by a parent aged 24 or younger. These families face unique challenges, because the parents often lack a high school diploma or GED, have limited work experience, and have never had their own home. Other cities are finding that young parents need tailored services. For example, Hennepin County (Minneapolis) found their RRH program does not work well for young parents, and is now piloting a RRH program with more intensive case management, life skills training, and education on how to support their child’s development. Additionally, young families can remain in the program for up to 24 months.

It is likely that young families in the District also need special help. Yet because the city has not done much to assess the circumstances of youth-headed homeless families, it is not clear what specialized interventions would help. DCFPI recommends that the District do more to understand why so many young families are seeking shelter, and then review its assessment tool and case management services to make sure they are sensitive to the special circumstances of young families.

⁴ Rapid Re-Housing: Creating Programs that Work. National Alliance to End Homelessness. July 2009. http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/adc8b82e3d49a50252_7dm6bk8te.pdf

Report on program outcomes to help track areas in need of improvement. Currently, DC does not report consistent, reliable and timely data on RRH outcomes, making it difficult to know how the program is performing and to identify areas in need of improvement. DCFPI recommends that The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP) and DHS work together to build up the capacity for regular reporting.