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TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At a Joint Public Roundtable on
Homelessness in the District of Columbia
District of Columbia Committee of the Whole and
Committee on Health and Human Services
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Chairman Mendelson, Chairwoman Alexander, and members of the committees, 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. I am also a voting member of the District's Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH).

I am here today to testify on the steps that the District should take immediately to address family homelessness this winter and to encourage the Council to fully support the ICH's Strategic Plan to tackle family homelessness in the next five years.

Immediate Steps to Tackle Family Homelessness

In recent years, the District, like other high-cost jurisdictions, has struggled with an increase in homelessness. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of homeless residents in DC increased by 18 percent. During the same period, the number of homeless residents increased by 27 percent in New York City and 17 percent in Boston.¹ With two months left in this hypothermia season, the increase in the number of homeless families in 2015 in DC may be even larger than the 16 percent anticipated by the Interagency Council on Homeless in the fiscal year (FY) 2015 Winter Plan.

The District should take the following steps as soon as possible to deal with this increase in the number of homeless families and to better address the needs of these families:

Increase the number of staff at Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. Virginia Williams Family Resource Center does not have enough staff to adequately serve the increasing number of families. These staff usually work with families to identify options other than entering shelter, such as staying with a family member, but do not have enough time to thoroughly do this. The staff shortage leads to families being unnecessarily placed in shelter in some cases when alternatives may be available. In the other extreme, the pressure on staff to make decisions quickly has led this year to a number of families being wrongfully denied eligibility for shelter and only placed after a lawyer has

¹ U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2007-2014-PIT-Counts-by-CoC.xlsx>

intervened. Given that wrongful denial can lead to families staying in unsafe locations such as abandoned buildings or cars, the District must ensure that there is adequate staff to review shelter applications. DCFPI urges the District to act quickly to increase the number of staff at Virginia Williams.

Do a thorough review of the shelter exit process to identify and address delays. Helping a family exit from shelter as quickly as possible helps them reestablish stability and ensures that shelter space is available for other needy families. It also saves money as providing shelter is extremely expensive, approximately \$150 per night. Exits have slowed down in the past two months for reasons that are not clear. The exit process involves a number of steps, including assessing the family's needs, ensuring the apartment passes inspection, and scheduling move-in. In addition, a number of agencies and staff assist the family during the process. This complexity makes it difficult to identify holdups in the absence of a formal review. By doing a thorough review and addressing delays, the District can better help families and save money.

Address critical issues with Rapid Re-housing. 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. Rapid Re-housing is supposed to move families quickly out of shelter and into stable and less chaotic environments. Three steps should be taken immediately as to better help families and expedite shelter exits.

- ***Better assist families in locating housing.*** Currently, the District's primary effort to help families identify apartments is through housing fairs. Not all families can attend these fairs because of work and school. And the available housing may not meet the particular needs of the family, such as wheelchair accessibility or proximity to transit needed to get to work or school. The District should provide individual housing search assistance, in addition to housing fairs, to help families exit as quickly as possible. In other communities, this kind of personalized housing search assistance has proven effective.
- ***Tailor length of assistance.*** Many families are hesitant to take Rapid Re-housing because they do not believe they will be able to afford their apartments after just 12 months. Assuring families that they will receive more assistance if they need it will encourage families to take Rapid Re-housing and put the District in line with national best practice. The National Alliance to End Homelessness recommends against using a hard time limit, arguing that programs must be "flexible enough to permit extensions if best efforts fail or another crisis occurs."² 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 circumstance and assuring families that they will receive the support they need.
- ***Explore ways for families to easily re-engage if they fall into trouble after exiting.*** Families have testified that they are hesitant to take Rapid Re-housing because they worry that they will run into problems and end up homeless again after their subsidy ends. 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

² Rapid Re-Housing: Creating Programs that Work. National Alliance to End Homelessness. July 2009. http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/adc8b82e3d49a50252_7dm6bk8te.pdf

return to their provider for additional case management and rental assistance if they fall on hard times.

Ensure the needs of children in DC General Family Shelter are being met. The FY 2015 budget included \$600,000 to hire licensed social workers to ensure that children at DC General are receiving the services they need to succeed. This funding has been left frozen by Mayor Bowser out of concerns over the FY 2015 budget gap. DCFPI encourages the District to release this modest amount of funding as soon as possible. In the meantime, the District should explore whether other government agencies can provide needed services in the short-term, such as whether the Office of Specialized Instruction at DCPS could come to DC General to provide assessments and services for young children at-risk of developmental delays.

Making Family Homelessness Rare and Brief

The ICH is currently developing a new Strategic Plan to outline how the District will tackle homelessness over the next five years, with the goal of making homelessness rare and brief. This means preventing homelessness wherever possible and ensuring families who do become homeless are moved into stable housing as soon as possible. With HUD-funded technical assistance, the ICH is identifying the number and type of housing intervention needed. This plan will require ending low-performing and low-priority programs, so that money can be shifted to higher-priority programs. Beyond that, the District will need to invest additional local funds to implement the plan and find ways to get new federal funding, for example, using Medicaid to fund supportive services provided through permanent supportive housing (PSH). DCFPI urges the Council to support this plan and to work to identify needed funding.

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