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New Proposal for Family Shelters Adds Bathrooms

By Kate Coventry

Mayor Bowser has pledged to increase the number of bathrooms in the city's new family shelters and to develop a better estimate of the number of homeless families with special needs requiring private bathrooms before completing shelter designs. DCFPI believes this is a reasonable compromise that increases privacy and helps ensure that the District can move forward with replacing the dilapidated DC General Family Shelter.

Bathroom designs and options in the new shelters are important for several reasons. Sharing bathrooms can pose safety concerns for families who have experienced trauma. Additionally, some families have disabilities that require a private bathroom.

At the same time, while many families need a private bathroom for these reasons, not all do. Requiring a private bathroom for every room could greatly increase the costs of replacing DC General, could make some of the potential sites for new shelters impractical, and thus could delay the closing DC General. The District has identified a number of potential new shelter sites throughout the city; because they have different dimensions and zoning limitations, capacity and floor plans will vary from site to site.

This means that the District needs to develop standards for the number and kinds of bathrooms in each shelter. The legislation being considered by the DC Council on Tuesday will call for each shelter to have a minimum of one locking family bathroom (with toilet, sink, and shower/tub) for every five families, and a private bathroom for at least 10 percent of new units. In a letter to the Council, Mayor Bowser expressed her intent to exceed these minimum standards by providing one private or family bathroom for every three families across the shelter sites.

In addition, the administration will perform an analysis to estimate the number of families with special needs who require private bathrooms prior to the finalization of design, and it has committed to creating an Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Family Work Group to provide feedback on family shelter redesign. Having this information will allow policymakers and the public to assess whether the proposed plans meet identified needs. If the process reveals that the shelter design does not provide enough bathrooms for families with special needs, the District should find the necessary resources to increase the number of private bathrooms.



Photo by: Johnathan Comer, *Street Sense*. Available [here](#).

The Interagency Council on Homelessness [Committee on Design Guidelines for Emergency Housing for Families Experiencing Homelessness](#) concluded that the “overwhelming recommendation was to maximize private bathroom space however possible without delaying closing DC General.” DCFPI believes this new proposal meets this recommendation and looks forward to the long overdue closure of DC General.

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