

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst  
At the Performance Oversight Hearing on the DC Department of Human Services  
DC Council Committee on Human Services  
March 8, 2018**

Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry and I am a Senior Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through independent research and thoughtful policy solutions.

I would like to focus my testimony on spending for individuals experiencing homelessness, the SOAR program, the POWER program, and new investments to serve youth experiencing homelessness.

### **Underspending in the Local Budget for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness**

DCFPI has concerns about a pattern of underspending on services and housing for individuals experiencing homelessness. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, the Department of Human Services spent \$3.5 million less than was budgeted on permanent supportive housing (PSH) and \$2.3 million less than was budgeted on Continuum services for individuals. In FY 2017, the agency combined these line items and spent \$2.2 less than was budgeted. During each of these years, the agency spent \$6 million more than was budgeted on families, raising the question of whether funding for individuals is being used to fill gaps in the family budget. DCFPI is concerned that this underspending is contributing to the delays in meeting the targets laid out in the Strategic Plan to End Homelessness and in individuals remaining unhoused for longer periods of time.

### **SOAR is Helping Residents Experiencing Homelessness Access Needed Benefits**

SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) is an evidence-based, national best practice model designed to increase access to disability benefits to adults who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. The model was developed because nationally only about 14 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness are approved on initial application for these benefits. In the past two years, the District has started supplementing privately-funded SOAR efforts by providing local funds through DHS and federal funds through the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH). After some early implementation challenges, this new funding is paying off. DC SOAR has a 73 percent approval rate on initial applications, compared to a 64 percent national SOAR rate. And applications have increased by 79 percent. Recognizing these great results, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) SOAR Technical Assistance Center named DC one of the “Top 10” in 2017.

Paying for a SOAR specialist costs about \$50,000 in salary and benefits. Given the current approval rate, each specialist can be expected to help 18 individuals secure benefits, that will be at least \$8,831 annually. This translates into \$158,958 in income for residents experiencing homelessness, a more than \$3 return per dollar spent on staff costs in the first year. In subsequent years, this return increases tremendously as the individuals approved in previous years continue to receive benefits and new individuals are approved. We hope to see the current SOAR investment continued in FY 2019.

## **New TANF Time Limit and POWER**

As a member of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Working Group, DCFPI is pleased to learn that DHS is on track to implement the new TANF time limit policy which will ensure that children always have income in the home. But we are concerned that parents who qualify for the Program on Work Employment and Responsibility (POWER) are not receiving timely assessments and needed services. We would like to learn more about how the agency informed, or plans to inform, affected clients of the change in domestic violence vendors to ensure that clients continue to receive services. We have also heard reports that clients are facing long delays in the processing of POWER medical reviews, and we would like to learn more about how the agency plans to address this issue.

## **Youth Homelessness Investments**

DCFPI is pleased to see that new investments mean more youth who are experiencing homelessness or are couchsurfing can access beds and services. The number of beds for LGBTQ youth has nearly doubled, increasing from 48 in FY 2017 to 88 in FY 2018. DCFPI is also pleased to see increases in the number of beds to ensure that youth in crisis are not forced to stay in unsafe situations and the planned launch of stabilization services that provide support to youth and their families to prevent youth homelessness. DCFPI hopes to see significant investments in the FY 2019 budget to continue this progress and work towards the *Solid Foundations* goal to end youth homelessness.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.