

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst  
At the Public Hearing on B22-635 the “Homeless Shelter Replacement Act of 2017” and  
The Closure of DC General Family Shelter  
DC Council Committee on Human Services  
March 14, 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.

DCFPI has strongly supported efforts to shelter families in small, community-based facilities across the District, rather than in the dilapidated DC General Family Shelter and low-cost motels, as part of the overall plan to end family homelessness. But DCFPI has questions about how the new, accelerated timeline for the closure of DC General will affect the District’s use of motels and its overall ability to shelter families safely and appropriately.

DC General was never intended to be a family shelter. The former hospital became a shelter after deplorable conditions and abusive staff behavior led to the abrupt closure of the DC Village Family Shelter. The District needed a place to shelter homeless families until families could secure permanent housing and began placing families in DC General, a building that had been unused since the hospital’s closure in 2001. The building’s age and years of disuse result in frequent elevator stoppages and pest infestations as well as hot water and heat outages, outages which affected residents just two weekends ago. With as many as 240 families sheltered at DC General, staff are unable to know all residents so all residents, including children, have to go through metal detectors to enter the building. The building also lacks sufficient space for services.

For years, since at least fiscal year 2012, when DC General has been fully occupied, the District has also sheltered families in rented motel rooms or entire motels contracted to operate as shelters, at times even sheltering families in Maryland. Conditions in these motels have varied greatly and most have lacked space for programming and private case management meetings. Transportation access has also varied, with Maryland motels posing a particular challenge.

Because of the problems with DC General and motels, DCFPI has supported the District’s plan to build smaller shelters across the District. These shelters will be new or newly renovated and designed with security needs in mind. The shelters will also have flexible programming space and private office space to offer confidential case management services. Each of the shelters will be located near metro and/or bus stops.

But DCFPI has concerns about closing DC General this fall, prior to the opening of all of the replacement shelters. While the Department of Human Services (DHS) has made tremendous progress on reducing the District’s reliance on motel rooms from the high of 929 in March 2016, it still sheltered 365 families in motel rooms on February 23<sup>rd</sup> of this year. This was in addition to 88 families in apartment-style shelters, 236 in DC General, and 5 in DC General Community Based Units, for a total of 694 families in shelter.

Using data from March 2017 through February 2018 which shows that, on average, exits outnumber entries by 13 per month, I estimate that DHS will need approximately 350 motel rooms in October if it closes DC General and will need to continue to use motel rooms through March 2020. What plans does the Department have for ensuring that the needed motel rooms can be obtained, without relying on motels outside the District? How will the Department ensure that conditions in these rooms are adequate? How will the Department ensure that motels have sufficient programming and case management space? And how does the accelerated closure of DC General affect the District's overall ability to shelter families in safe and appropriate spaces now and in the future? Finally, how will the Department cope if the number of entries skyrockets or the pace of exits slows?

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