

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst
At the Public Oversight Roundtable on Short-Term Family Housing Construction Progress
DC Council Committee on Human Services and
Committee on Transportation and the Environment
June 25, 2018**

Chairperson Nadeau, Chairperson Cheh, and members of the Committees, 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, a division of the non-profit organization the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. DCFPI 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 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 in 2007. 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. 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 (FY) 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 continues to have grave concerns about closing DC General this fall, prior to the opening of all of the replacement shelters, particularly given construction delays at the Wards 7 and 8 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 341 families in motel rooms on June 18th of this year. This was in addition to approximately 88 families in apartment-style shelters, 176 in DC General, and 5 in DC General Community Based Units, for a total of 610 families in shelter. Using data

from June 2017 through May 2018, which shows that exits outnumber entries by an average of 16 per month, I estimate that, if these trends hold constant, DHS will need approximately 400 motel rooms in October if it closes DC General and the Wards 7 and 8 shelters have not come online. Additionally, DHS will need to continue to use motel rooms through October 2019 given the current timeline for shelter completion.

What is a reasonable timeline for finishing the shelters, given construction delays in the Wards 7 and 8 shelters and possible future delays? 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? Is the FY 2019 DHS budget adequate to ensure that funding for shelter does not have to be taken from other priorities, such as housing or services for single adults? 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.