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Defending Our Neighbors Who Live in Encampments

By DCFPI Staff

With our offices in NoMa, DCFPI staff feel compelled to weigh in on the issue of homeless encampments in the neighborhood. A focus on moving encampments doesn't solve anything because it fails to address the underlying causes—a severe shortage of affordable housing and a shelter system in need of improvement. Clearing encampments one day usually means tents show up around the block the next. Instead, we urge the NoMa community to join us in promoting real solutions to encampments that meet the needs of those staying there and promote the dignity of every DC resident.

Our neighbors who are homeless have good reasons for staying outside. The majority of DC's shelters for individuals are old, very large, and in bad condition. While the recently passed budget includes funding to repair and replace several shelters, this will take time. Additionally, shelters do not allow pets, have limits on the number of bags allowed, and are sex segregated so some folks cannot go into shelter with their friends or family. The District is currently working to create solutions to these issues, and DCFPI applauds these efforts.



Encampments are primarily a manifestation of our worsening affordable housing needs. The lack of affordable housing — not mental health and substance use — is the [leading driver in the increase in homelessness](#). The [Fair Market Rent](#) is \$1,561 for a one-bedroom apartment in DC. That requires an income of over \$60,000 a year to afford or working 91 hours per week at the minimum wage. [Rising rents have eliminated nearly all low-cost housing options](#) in the private market in the District over the past decade, and thousands of subsidized apartments have been lost because the requirement to stay affordable expired. Approximately 40,000 households are on the DC Housing Authority for affordable housing vouchers.

Housing ends homelessness. Over 5,000 individuals have moved into housing in DC since the launch of Homeward DC, the Strategic Plan to end homelessness, and 93 percent did not return to homelessness within one year. While DC's progress is going in the right direction, much more is needed given the continuing loss of affordable housing. The Fiscal Year 2020 budget will end homelessness for 615 individuals but at least 1,300 individuals will remain homeless.

Ending homelessness is also an issue of racial justice. People of color bear the brunt of DC's affordable housing challenges. [Eight-seven percent](#) of adults experiencing homelessness are Black. This is the result of enduring legacies of structural and individualized racism — racist zoning and residential segregation, redlining, restrictive covenants, practices barring federal employment— that for years prohibited Black families from equitably accessing the housing and employment markets. This has led to the current racial

wealth gap as wealth accumulates over generations. Additionally, the historic denial of homeownership opportunities to people of color through discriminatory lending practices means that most Black residents, even middle-income residents, are renters. Many renters cannot keep up with skyrocketing rental costs and are pushed into homelessness.

We hope the NoMa community will join us in advocating for the best solution to homelessness — affordable housing. Our elected officials need to hear from us that affordable housing is a priority.