

**Testimony of Qubilah Huddleston, Education Policy Analyst
at the Department of Behavioral Health Public Oversight Hearing
Committee on Health
October 22, 2020**

Chairperson Gray and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Qubilah Huddleston and I am a Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI). DCFPI is a nonprofit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's racial and economic inequities through independent research and policy recommendations.

I'm testifying today to urge the Mayor and the Council to protect investments in vital behavioral health services in the District. While the Chief Financial Officer projects further revenue loss in fiscal years (FY) 2021 through 2024, policymakers have revenue options that they can use to avoid draconian budget cuts to public programs that residents need.

The District Could Be Facing a Major Mental Health Crisis—Budget Cuts to Services Would Worsen It

The ongoing unpredictability of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, economic shutdown, distance learning and other “new normals” means that the District could be facing a major mental health crisis. Larger percentages of DC residents reported symptoms of anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, and not receiving needed counseling than residents surveyed in more than half of the other states in the country between September 30 and October 12, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's weekly Household Pulse Survey.¹ These data are sobering and demonstrate that now more than ever, residents need better and consistent access to behavioral health services.

Maintaining Investments in Behavioral Health Care is Part of a #JustRecoveryDC

Protecting investments in the District's behavioral health system is the economically and racially just thing for policymakers to do. Low-income families and families of color in DC are facing disproportionate COVID-19 health outcomes and increased housing, food, and economic insecurity. Black residents are facing greater race-based trauma as videos of Black people being murdered by police officers and the violent reactions from police against protestors have become a part of our regular news cycle and social media feeds. Policymakers need to make good on the racial equity commitments many of you made during the FY 2021 budget cycle by protecting investments in health programs that low-income residents and Black and brown residents need.

DCFPI fought hard alongside other advocates during the FY 2021 budget process for new investments in the District's School-Based Mental Health Program and we were successful—the Council approved an additional \$3.3 million that allows DBH to expand the program to an additional 47 public schools in the current school year. We were disappointed, however, that policymakers voted against several revenue proposals that would have fully reversed the Mayor's proposed \$9.5 million cut to community-based behavioral services. Community-based providers who were already operating on thin margins are now facing greater financial strain, making the behavioral health system more vulnerable during the worst possible time.

Policymakers Should Consider Revenue Options That Don't Further Harm DC's Most Vulnerable

Policymakers will undoubtedly devastate the city's behavioral health ecosystem if they agree to a FY 2021 supplemental budget that includes further cuts to DBH. Many providers will be forced to shutter their doors and low-income residents who are shouldering an unequal amount of stress and trauma for an indefinite amount of time will have fewer places to turn for help. To help prevent this from happening, policymakers should:

- **Strategically take advantage of the District's FY 2020 surplus:** The CFO's revised revenue forecasts shows a projected \$222 million dollar surplus in the FY 2020 budget. Policymakers should strategically use this revenue to fill projected revenue shortfalls in the FY 2021 budget and beyond.
- **Require wealthy residents—who have largely been financially unscathed by the pandemic—to pay their fair share in income taxes:** It is time for policymakers to take bold action and lead the city through a more just economic recovery by requiring more of those who can contribute more. A teacher in DC earning \$60,000 a year pays the same tax rate as a CEO earning \$350,000. That same teacher's tax rate is only half a percentage point less than what the president of a real estate company earning over \$1 million pays. This is fundamentally unjust, and it's bad economic policy.
- **Reduce MPD's budget and redirect funds to programs that support good mental health:** DC is one of the most policed jurisdictions in the country, yet residents aren't any safer and overpoliced low-income communities of color aren't faring any better.² The Council should divest from policing and reinvest in services that give residents opportunities and keep them safe, housed, and physically and mentally well.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "[Household Pulse Survey](#)," 2020.

² Governing, "[Police Employment, Officers Per Capita Rates for U.S. Cities](#)," updated July 2, 2018.