

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst
At the Public Roundtable on the response to the COVID-19 public emergency
by the agencies under the purview of the Committee on Human Services
DC Council Committee on Human Services
November 4, 2020**

Chairperson Nadeau and other members of the Council, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a Senior Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a nonprofit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's economic and racial inequities and to build widespread prosperity in the District of Columbia, through independent research and policy recommendations.

I am here today to recognize the positive steps that the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) have taken to protect some of the most vulnerable DC residents. I am also here to ask that the District:

- suspend encampment clearings;
- ensure that toilet and handwashing stations are functioning and add these facilities to neighborhoods that need them;
- identify a range of daytime service options;
- explore all possibilities for non-congregate shelter;
- review shelter and Pandemic Emergency Program for Medically Vulnerable Individuals (PEP-V) capacity biweekly;
- use interim eligibility to ensure families have safe places to stay; and,
- buy unused hotels to convert into PEP-V and PSH sites.

DHS and the ICH Have Taken a Number of Positive Steps to Protect Vulnerable Residents During COVID-19

DHS and the ICH have faced an unprecedented situation with the COVID-19 crisis and have taken a number of steps that have protected clients and ensured access to critically needed benefits including:

- Waiving recertification and in-person interview requirements for medical insurance, food, and cash benefits whenever allowed by the federal government;
- Quickly implementing pandemic EBT food benefits that are intended to replace school meals while schools were closed last school year and working over the weekend to distribute benefits for September 2020;
- Reducing the number served at each site used for shelter to allow for social distancing and planning for a possible 20 percent increase in shelter capacity;
- Offering three meals per day, improving case management options, and allowing 24-hour access at shelter sites so individuals can practice social distancing and do not need to leave the shelter;

- Partnering with Unity Health on the PEP-V sites. These are hotel rooms for individuals experiencing homelessness thought to be at the greatest risk for severe complications and/or death if they contract COVID-19;
- Working to ensure as many DHS clients as possible received stimulus checks by providing help directly to clients as well as guidance to providers; and,
- Distributing 77,000 meals to unsheltered individuals.

The District Should Suspend Encampment Clearings for at Least the Duration of the Public Health Emergency

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that “if individual housing options are not available, allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are” because “clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.”¹

Further, everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Encampment clearings are invasive as well as disruptive.

The District is still clearing encampments. DCFPI urges the District to protect the health and dignity of those living in encampments by following CDC guidance and halting all encampment clearings at least until the end of the public health emergency.

The District Should Ensure that Current Portable Handwashing Stations and Toilets are Functioning and Provide Additional Facilities

The District is currently providing portable handwashing stations and toilets at locations across the city. While these are helpful, there have been reports that some stations lack water and soap. The District should regularly check each station to ensure that it is functioning.

Additionally, as we face an anticipated third COVID-19 surge, new encampments may be setting up or existing encampments may be adding individuals. The District should look at the locations of all current encampments and add handwashing stations and toilets wherever feasible.

The District Needs to Identify a Range of Daytime Services As Soon As Possible

Every year, some individuals experiencing homelessness do not seek shelter for a variety of reasons, including worries over safety and cleanliness in shelters. This year these worries are likely to be compounded due to COVID-19. Normally these individuals depend on libraries, restaurants, coffee shops, cafes, stores, houses of worship, and daytime service centers as refuge from the cold. Most of these places are either closed or have limited hours because of the pandemic. Of the two main service centers for adults, Adams Place is closed so it can be used as shelter for women, and the Downtown Daytime Service Center limits the number who can be served and requires appointments.

The District needs to identify a diverse set of daytime service options to replace the diverse set of options that are not available. Having a diverse set of options will make it most likely that the

District will meet the needs of the most clients. For example, some clients need a location that accommodates a large number of personal belongings. Others need services in particular geographic locations because of limited mobility and the lack of scheduled transportation this year. DCFPI suggests that the District consult with COVID-19 experts to explore the following as options for daytime services:

- Using WMATA or Circulator buses. These have been popular warming sites in the past, can be placed in a number of neighborhoods, and allow folks to watch a large number of belongings outside the bus;
- Closing all or a portion of some streets and erecting tents with heaters;
- Using the Convention Center, Capital One Arena, the Entertainment and Sports Arena, unused food courts and building lobbies;
- Houses of worship that may be currently closed because of COVID-19;
- Expanding the number served at libraries and daytime service centers; and
- Using “phase two” shelters that are not scheduled to open until “phase one” shelters are 75 percent full.

We understand that staff must be available to make these sites a reality. We encourage DHS and the ICH to hire more people with lived experience of homelessness and to explore the possibility of hiring individuals who have lost their jobs in the pandemic.

The District Should Explore All Possibilities for Non-Congregate Shelter

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development just released guidance that the best practice approach for winter sheltering during COVID-19 is private individual rooms.² DCFPI encourages the District to fully explore all possible options for providing as many private individual rooms as possible such as vacant hotel rooms, dorm rooms, and offices.

DCFPI also encourages the District to identify enough PEP-V rooms to accompany all those referred to the program.

The District Should Review Shelter and PEP-V Capacity Biweekly

Through the ICH Shelter Capacity Committee, government and community partners review shelter utilization monthly to ensure there is sufficient capacity. This year, because of the many uncertainties we are facing, we recommend this review occur biweekly and include review of PEP-V utilization and the number of outstanding referrals to PEP-V.

The District Should Ensure Families Have Access to Needed Shelter by Using Interim Eligibility

The interim eligibility process allows DHS to place families temporarily into shelter when the agency is unable to determine the family’s eligibility at the time of application. We recommend that DHS recognize that the public health emergency may make it more difficult for some families to prove eligibility, including collecting documents, and that families may have fewer safe places to stay because family members have COVID-19 or practicing social distancing. We urge the District to use interim eligibility whenever possible to ensure that families have a safe place to stay.

The District Should Take Advantage of The Pandemic and Buy Unused Hotels

All of the above recommendations will promote the safety of residents experiencing homelessness during this year, but none of them will actually end homelessness. In order to do that, the District must invest more in permanent housing solutions. The fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget has the smallest investments made in housing since the passage of the “Homeward DC Strategic Plan to End Homelessness” in 2015. The District should follow the lead of other jurisdictions across the country and buy currently unused hotels to convert temporarily into PEP-V sites and then into Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).

PSH combines affordable housing with intensive, wraparound services for our most vulnerable homeless residents. The District has invested heavily into tenant based PSH, in which recipients receive vouchers to rent apartments. These former hotel buildings would be fulfilling a great need cited in the forthcoming “Homeward DC 2.0 Plan,” the need for sites that are all or mostly PSH that can provide even more intensive services like meals, personal care services, and services related to aging. Other jurisdictions have been able to purchase buildings for lower than normal prices because of the pandemic. The District should do the same.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I’m happy to answer any questions.

¹ “Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, revised August 6, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>