



Homeless Children's Playtime Project

Families Deserve Housing • Children Deserve Play •

1525 Newton St., NW, Washington, DC 20010 • www.playtimeproject.net • (202) 329-4481

Family Shelter Crisis in Hypothermia Season Roundtable: 2/3/14 Testimony of Jamila Larson, LICSW - Homeless Children's Playtime Project

The Homeless Children's Playtime Project is honored to be here today to offer our support as we face this unprecedented family homeless crisis in our city. As you know, the Playtime Project partners with shelters to provide age-appropriate educational and therapeutic programming to 600 children per year in five shelters and housing programs. We do not receive nor do we seek city funding. Nearly 500 volunteers a year run our 13 weekly programs for infants through teens. We help babies get bathtubs and teenagers into college and everything in between.

Like everyone here, our organization is very concerned about the growing numbers of children and families seeking shelter this winter because we know first-hand the effects of homelessness on the children we serve. The time for blame is over; we know what the problem is and we need to decide as a community if we are willing to actually solve what is a solvable problem.

The same day we are reading headlines about record family homelessness in our city, we are reading headlines about a record city surplus, now at \$321 million. We know that the homeless crisis is a symptom of the poverty crisis; we know there is a direct connection between gleaming new development and the resulting gentrification with the dramatic loss of affordable housing (to the tune of 50% or 35,000 units lost between 2000 and 2010). While the number of high-cost apartments in DC has more than tripled in the last decade, the lowest-income 40% of DC households has not seen an increase in income.

This is a math problem and a priorities problem that cannot be solved by DHS or any one agency. Just like *no one agency* can solve the problem, *no one program* can be the only solution. Take Rapid Re-housing, for example. This important tool is designed for families who can afford market rate rent after 4 months of rental assistance. Families are told it can be extended for up to a year, but many are not told it's actually up to two years which may make it a more palatable option for them. Understandably, most landlords are not comfortable renting to someone without a job and a subsidy that could run out at any time. The bottom line is we know that most families earning TANF or minimum wage simply cannot afford a market rate apartment. If we tell ourselves anything different, we are just asking for families to continue to cycle back through the homeless service system as 40% of families in shelter have been there before.

The typical low-income renter already spends 2/3 of their income on rent and the so-called "housing wage" is \$25/hour in this city. A single parent who has not finished high school or held a steady job is no match for these statistics with just a "light touch" investment. Nearly half of all TANF families are living doubled up, which technically meets the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. We're talking about babies cutting their first tooth while sleeping on the floor of a loud and crowded apartment, kids learning how to read while sleeping on a different couch each night on the run from a father threatening to kill their mother, young people studying for the SAT's from their family's car.

These are not overly dramatic stories; we have thousands of children and their families who are really suffering in our community. Living doubled up on one hand is a temporary solution as old as time and yet can be a very real safety issue; I have handled numerous cases as a social worker of children being sexually abused in crowded apartments while parents were trying to find housing. The shelter and overflow hotel system offers families a critical safety net from battling the storm of poverty. Obviously, sheltering families

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together in the same room poses safety risks unless privacy barriers can be created which hopefully is being done at the recreation centers.

We know that the reliance on this expensive side of the continuum is not sustainable and it's a lot cheaper to house families than shelter them and certainly better for children. We recommend:

- More case management and data analysis for ERAP with the goal of keeping families housed to prevent homelessness in the first place,
- Year-round shelter access for Priority 1 families, which is important for any civilized city because homelessness does not have a season. People become evicted, experience domestic violence, and lose jobs year around and it makes no sense to place a disproportionate burden on the hypothermia season. Residency requirements prevent out-of-state families from showing up here to seek shelter; a lot of families I know move to P.G. County to find more affordable housing so I am sure Maryland feels the burden.
- Since vouchers offer one of the surest ways of ending homelessness, we would like the city to continue to invest in the LRSP. To avoid the perception of a shelter incentive, perhaps we can look at how families enter PSH with a vulnerability index and develop a similar way to prioritize need so families can access LRSP through the Rapid Re-housing program without having to go through the shelter system first.
- A far greater commitment to more investments in affordable housing for low income families to ensure racial and economic diversity in our city. It's great to have housing for police officers and teachers but what about store clerks, child care workers and cleaning staff? People who work here should be able to live here too, but that is becoming increasingly difficult.

We want DHS and the City Council to know that private partners are available for free to help weather this storm, and organizations like ours we are capable of much more if only asked. We are reaching out to the hotel managers to drop off activity packs for the children to have something to keep them occupied; we would be happy to do so at the rec centers as well if needed. Each year, we help all of the teens in our program sign up for the summer jobs program. We are partnering with DOES to bring them to DC General next year to make sure that *all of the eligible youth* at the shelter sign up for this critical program that helps keep them engaged and boosts family income.

Our friends at LIFT provide free, low-barrier job and housing search assistance and are always looking for new clients and new partners. Perhaps they could even come into the shelters or the intake center if asked. There are a lot of good and smart, generous people in our city, and we have not begun to tap the resources that exist to solve the problem of rising homelessness and a lack of affordable housing in DC. We look forward to working with you to build a city where no child has to worry about having a roof over their head.

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