



Homeless Children's Playtime Project

Families Deserve Housing • Children Deserve Play •

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

Testimony before the Committee on Human Services Performance Oversight Hearing

Jamila Larson, Executive Director, HCPP

February 26, 2014

Sometimes, when a system is in crisis, what gets lost is the fact that we have a lot of **little people in crisis** too. While we know the problem is big and complicated, we also know that there are some common sense solutions that deserve attention and will make a huge difference in the lives of the 1,400 children who find themselves essentially under our roof.

For better or for worse, we have chosen to make DC General a temporary shelter so we need to commit to making it the best place it can be as long as we don't have a better alternative. After all, these are precious children, these are families in crisis. People will always choose affordable housing over shelter, but while they are here, let's invest in families to keep them from coming back. I'm concerned that there seems to be a philosophical resistance to offering programs and services inside the shelter, where we have a captive audience of people who need help. Consequently, the family's time in shelter can be squandered. There is no reason to wait for "Housing First" to help people find jobs. While some caseworkers are offering this assistance, in our experience, others are not, leaving our social work interns to step in to help the families in our program access basic services. Why not bring in DOES to set up a job fair, sign up every single eligible teen for the summer jobs program, or partner with a nonprofit like LIFT to come in and help people create resumes, apply for jobs, practice interviewing, find training programs? These partnerships should not come at an additional cost. What are we waiting for?

Amazing staff members like Parchelle Brooks and Kevin Franklin are clearly invested in trying to make the shelter the best place possible but may lack the resources necessary to fully realize that goal. This winter, one of the children in our pre-teen program was experiencing suicidal thoughts and was lashing out at himself and others. When Playtime staff brought him out to the hallway to ask for help locating the child's father, not only was that help not provided, but the floor monitor yelled at the child, "You're going to jail." This tells me the staff are not receiving training on creating a "trauma informed" shelter environment which is essential when working with a population that overwhelmingly has experiences with trauma. Everyone from the security guard to the floor monitor to the caseworkers deserves to have these tools in their toolkit to create the kind of environment where people can start to heal and not be re-traumatized by the environment. The security guards, to my knowledge, are not receiving any specialized training for interacting with this population and they often have the most face-time with families.

As a nonprofit partner that serves 100 children per week from infants through teens, it is unfortunate that we can barely get a referral from the case managers to our programs. This tells me that either they're totally overwhelmed or don't have time to think about the needs of the children who are very much in crisis themselves. Most of the youth at the shelter are doing poorly in school and our trained volunteers provide 1:1 tutoring, homework help, college preparation support, and educational advocacy. We've asked for one more room to provide a quieter tutoring space but that request has been denied by DGS. The youth are

Board of Directors: Kirsten Lodal • Robert Edwards • David Graling • Jamila Larson • Geoffrey Mountvarner • Patricia Mullahy-Fugere • Jan Piercy



Homeless Children's Playtime Project

Families Deserve Housing • Children Deserve Play •

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

continually displaced for meetings scheduled in the main activity room, and our program has to be cancelled on those nights.

Right now, one of the teenagers we serve is going through the universally arduous process of applying to college. The continuous problems with Internet access, broken computers, and inadequate space to study for take a practice SAT test puts him at a disadvantage compared to his peers. Increasingly, college applications are online. Would he be able to apply at all if it were not for his volunteer mentor walking him through the process, signing up and taking him to the SAT test site, and providing a safe place for him to study with support three times each week? We have offered our support to get the computer lab in better working order and hope this problem will be treated with the sense of urgency the situation demands.

We have also noticed children sitting on the floor in the lobby of the shelter waiting for their parents to return home from work. We would like DHS to consider amending the rules to allow a parent-approved adult to supervise children in latchkey situations which would give parents the opportunity to work or attend classes while ensuring their children are supervised. We are also concerned that the 6th floor door of the stairwell is wide open and contains the perfect props for a horror film (dirty hospital beds, leaky ceilings, mangled walkers, broken glass and rubble, etc.) We have reported this safety concern and the problem continues. It should not take a hearing to remove dirty diapers from the roof or to keep a door closed.

We would like to offer our support to build a playground out front. We have secured private funding to build one at no cost to the city and we hope that DHS will partner with us to make this playground a reality no matter how long the shelter is there. **The pressure not to create anything new at DC General should be no match for the pressure of child development.** Children deserve opportunities to safely play outside every day, just like our own children do. There is no reason child development should be at odds with economic development. We are hopeful to partner with the city to create a win-win solution.

We are concerned that the use of rec centers is a serious threat to child development and that they are not the solution to reducing the homeless census, unless our goal is to make life as challenging as possible for families in crisis. The census being down does not equal family safety and stability and that needs to be our goals as a community. It is not appropriate to expect children to be up past their bedtime (by not being admitted until 9:00 p.m.) or have parents hustle every day to reapply for shelter, and not even get in when temperatures hover above freezing. When families do not have doors that lock, it can be very difficult for people who have trauma histories to relax and fall asleep.

We also have serious concerns about proposed changes to the Homeless Services Reform Act that is aimed at reducing the shelter population but could result in putting more families in dangerous situations with fewer legal protections. The tone of the recent political rhetoric seems to be framing the problem as blaming families seeking shelter. Let's reframe the discussion and get at the root of the problem: How do we work together to ensure that families don't return to the system again and again, and rather, have the opportunities they need to work and live in DC? When one system is overwhelmed due to the failings of other systems, it's important to ask for help. We look forward to continuing to work with DHS to be a part of the solution.

Board of Directors: Kirsten Lodal • Robert Edwards • David Graling • Jamila Larson • Geoffrey Mountvarner • Patricia Mullahy-Fugere • Jan Piercy