



**Committee on Human Services Hearing on B22-635
Homeless Shelter Replacement Amendment Act of 2017
"The Closure of the DC General Family Shelter"**

**Testimony from:
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March 14, 2018**

I come to you today to share our expertise as a nonprofit organization that has faithfully served the needs of about 5,000 children inside ten family homeless shelters and transitional housing programs over the past fifteen years. The Homeless Children's Playtime Project is committed to developing resiliency in children to reduce chronic homelessness. We create bright play spaces for infants through teens with programming designed to foster learning and healing through play, while also connecting families to support services. We have seen firsthand, and the science backs us up, that resiliency requires comprehensive, trauma-informed services for children and families. We hope our independent recommendations based on our unique vantage point are useful during this transition period, and beyond.

What happens inside our city's family shelters, or doesn't happen, makes an enormous difference in the lives of some of the most vulnerable children and families in our city. Families come into the homeless service system for housing, often times after being failed by many other systems; but their needs typically go well beyond four walls and a roof. While a lot may have changed over the past fifteen years, and there have certainly been recent improvements, one thing that has not changed enough, despite our best efforts, is that, in many settings, children in homeless families remain invisible.

We now have an opportunity with the seven new Short-Term Family Housing sites to ensure our children are seen and heard, and that their needs are addressed. Children outnumber adults in shelters. While DHS is working diligently to improve the case management system, far too many children are not getting the services they need. To ensure the time families spend in these new housing units is really short-term, the city must provide services that meet the urgent developmental needs and enormous risks these children face. If the length of stay is going to shrink as planned in the new sites, having comprehensive services from day one is critical.

All family housing programs must be truly trauma-informed with comprehensive clinical case management services that include children's needs. This must begin with the RFPs that are drafted to select the service providers for each new site. Oversight is essential to ensure that providers meet strict criteria and that the provision of critical services is actually occurring once the new sites are open. Only then can the goal of making homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring become a reality.

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Our recommendation is that all of the new Short-Term Family Housing sites, in each ward, and any temporary housing spaces, such as the motels, include:

1. A requirement of, and funding for, **licensed, Masters-level human services** staff who have the skills and experience necessary to provide comprehensive, clinical case management supervision. Without this investment and expectation, no amount of training can fix fundamental gaps in expertise.
 2. Providers with a demonstrated commitment to the principles of **trauma-informed care** and **experience serving children** from infants through teens. "Serving" children does not just mean housing them with their parents. Children are customers too and their journey through homelessness often results in a lifetime of consequences caused by a lack of early intervention services.
 3. A requirement that providers administer **needs assessments for children** when they enter the shelter so staff are able to provide targeted referrals to connect children with critical services that can support them both in the program as well as after shelter exit to help shore up family stability.
 4. A requirement that providers vigorously provide **"high-impact" referrals** to eligible families to ensure they are universally connected to evidence-based interventions that help reverse the many risk factors associated with homelessness. Interventions should include developmental assessments, home visiting programs that provide parenting education and support both in and out of shelter, and the Summer Youth Employment Program for teens. All family shelter providers must commit to increasing early childhood education enrollment from child care to pre-k programs, which impacts school readiness, high school graduation rates, and parents' work readiness. This does not mean merely giving parents a piece of paper. Instead, it means qualified staff taking the time to identify and remove barriers to parents taking advantage of these impactful interventions.
 5. Providers who know how to **bring in other city agencies**, including TANF, DMH, CFSA, OSSE, DOES, and DOH to start collaborating on behalf of the families from day one; and
 6. A requirement that providers bring their own private dollars to the table to supplement city contracts to help invest in **more quality services and community partnerships**.
- Since this hearing is focused primarily around the transition time between when DCG is closed and the new housing sites are open, we would be remiss if we didn't also mention the importance of families having consistency in the services they received at DCG. Playtime serves about 400 children there annually and we are able to do so because of the accessibility for our volunteers and the space to do our work. We hope the city recognizes the critical impact Playtime, and other nonprofit partners, have had on the families at DCG and work with us to enable those supports to continue, both during the transition and after the new sites open.

Playtime will need help acquiring storage for our toys and equipment until we can find future shelter partners. In order to successfully operate in new settings beginning in September, such as the motels, we ask for the city's support to ensure contractors know that appropriate space for children's programming is expected. Once plans are finalized for the new housing units, we hope Playtime can continue working

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with the city and the providers to better serve the city's children and families trying to get back on their feet. Let's make sure we set up these new housing programs right from the start. We look forward to continuing to partner with you during this transition time, and beyond, to help ensure that the needs of children are front and center.

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