Dear Friend of Children,

Sometimes in our work as the Playtime community, it seems that the only thing we can count on is change. The families we serve are working hard to raise their children on a foundation of housing instability, while battling domestic violence, addiction, and family crises on their way to work and school. Children must navigate the uncertainty of a new shelter, sometimes a new school, and ever-changing communities, as much of their lives feel always in transition.

In the midst of this uncertainty, the Playtime Project has become a source of stability and strength for so many children and families. Our impact has been multiplied this year by the establishment of a beautiful, state-of-the-art playground on the doorstep of the DC General shelter. Thanks to our partnerships with the city and generous private supporters, the playground is a game changer, allowing hundreds of children to grow, play, and experience a safe and healthy space seven days a week.

We are energized by the positive partnerships we are developing with the DC government, community partners, and a vibrant network of foundation and corporate benefactors. Thanks to the amazing work of our staff, volunteers, and communities of support, the Playtime Project is succeeding in bringing a measure of reliability, security, and fun to children and families experiencing homelessness.

With twenty weekly sessions that touch the lives of hundreds of families, you are truly changing lives. As we look to the year ahead, we are inspired by what has already been accomplished, and hopeful that the days to come will bring even more of the stability and joy that all children so richly deserve.

With gratitude,

Jamila Larson, LICSW
Executive Director, Co-founder
Homeless Children’s Playtime Project
The mission of the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project is to nurture healthy child development and reduce the effects of trauma among children living in temporary housing programs in Washington, D.C.

We believe that play is a human right that all children deserve, regardless of housing status. We seek to create a city that provides every opportunity for children in homeless families to succeed by ensuring that children have consistent opportunities to play and learn, providing support services for families, and advocating for affordable housing and safe shelter.

Through eight programs and twenty weekly children’s sessions, staff and volunteers provide structured activities, the freedom to explore, and opportunities to learn and heal through play. Children receive one-on-one attention and caring supervision, access to field trips and summer camps, and educational advocacy to help them stay on track. Families receive support services and referrals as well as donations of clothing, toys, and school supplies throughout the year.

“The ways Playtime has impacted me over this past year have been nothing short of life-changing...The kids are able to play, grow, and learn in an environment especially catered to them. The smiles on their faces bring me back, week in and week out.”

Ellen Thomson, Playtime Volunteer
Playtime project makes an impact

*In 2014:*

- 736 youths served
- 376 weekly volunteers
- 10,368 volunteer hours served
- 475 personalized holiday gifts distributed
- 500 backpacks distributed
- 600 Halloween costumes distributed
- 26 field trips
- 20 weekly programs at five sites

173 referrals were made to outside programs and services to support families’ goals such as:

- housing
- employment
- child care
- health care
- clothing
- computers
- adult education
- transportation
- development assessments
- summer camps
- food
- furniture

**Of our parents surveyed:**

- 95% said our programs help them relax by giving them a break
- 90% said their children learn new skills in our programs
- 90% said their children are treated warmly and affectionately by Playtime volunteers
- 85% said their children are less stressed because of our programs
- 80% said our programs help their children grow and develop
- 75% said our programs help them find services for their children
Financial impact in 2014

$939,192
REVENUE

$698,540
EXPENSES

$98,891
IN-KIND DONATIONS

9%
Fundraising

70%
Program

21%
Management and general

11%
In-kind donations

60%
Grants from foundations and corporations

29%
Individual donations

It’s truly special to get to be a part of these kids’ lives—from seeing them start to use words, to growing six inches in a year, to celebrating their everyday achievements. I hope I am giving them back even some of the joy that they’ve given me.”

Jillian Bashore, Playtime Volunteer
We did it!

Playtime leads effort to bring playground to DC General

The children are not allowed to play in the halls, the rec rooms are basically a TV room designed for adults to sit in, and playing in there is frowned upon. Outside is surrounded by moving buses and blighted buildings, so the playground is literally the only safe place where kids can play each day at DC General. Kids have to be connected at the parent’s hip at all times, except when they run out on the playground and then they have room to breathe. Both parents and children get a break. Leisure activities, gross motor skill development, communication skills, building confidence, and building community. It all happens out on the playground!"

Ron Sheffer, Playtime Site Manager

The Homeless Children’s Playtime Project is proud to report that after much negotiation and advocacy, our playground at the DC General Family Emergency Shelter opened in October 2014! The project was a joint venture between Playtime, the DC government, and the DC business community, led by Pepco and the Greater Washington Board of Trade. The DC government funded and built the playground with the agreement that the Playtime Project, with support from private donors, provide staffing. Thanks to our dedicated Playground Managers, the playground is open seven days a week, giving children living at DC General access to safe outdoor play right where they live.

Since its opening last year, under the leadership of our first Playground Manager, Ron Sheffer, our play space has served more than 500 children and logged around 5,000 visits. Many of these children do not regularly attend Playtime or Preteen Programs at DC General because of space and time constraints, but the playground allows us to provide services and resources to these youth and their families. On this new outdoor oasis, there are almost no limits to the number or age of participants, so children are free to stretch, jump, run, balance, catch, and otherwise develop their gross motor and communication skills while having a blast!
New initiatives in 2014

Parenting classes at DC General

Playtime recognizes that the most important relationship to a child is the one with their parents. We also know that homelessness puts a tremendous strain on parents’ ability to cope and manage daily parenting challenges. Our parenting classes began at DC General, offering an evidenced-based curriculum providing an opportunity for parents to come together and learn practical parenting skills. As a result, parents expressed a greater awareness of their children's age-appropriate behaviors and a better understanding of positive discipline, reporting they relied less on yelling and corporal punishment after the class.

Playtime at Hope Apartments

In the fall of 2014, we reestablished a partnership with Community of Hope at Hope Apartments, a transitional housing facility serving heads of household who are in the early stages of overcoming substance abuse. The program is made possible by a team of veteran volunteers who bring years of dedication and commitment to serving our children and families in Anacostia. Now, while parents attend recovery support groups, their children are being safely cared for in Playtime: reading, jumping, exploring, and creating with our dedicated staff and volunteers.

Stronger data collection and program evaluation efforts

We want to know not only how many children we’ve served, but the impact of our programs on their lives. HCPP has begun to augment our measurement and evaluation efforts by both investing in Powerschool, an online tool that will help us better capture data in 2015, and increasing our staff training and focus on outcomes. We plan to segment participants by age and measure their progress in the following domains: social competence, self-regulation, perseverance, self-control, and peer relationships—all areas proven to promote resilience.

Playtime does more than play

- **Supporting school success:** Through our Playtime Curriculum, children have the opportunity to participate in structured learning activities that reinforce critical skills. Children under five have access to developmental assessments, while older children are offered homework help and tutoring. Site Managers serve as educational advocates to help families get their children’s needs met.

- **Providing healthy snacks:** We serve fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy snacks, keeping in mind that childhood obesity and other nutrition-related health deficiencies disproportionately affect our youth.

- **Planning field trips:** We give children the freedom to escape the stress of shelter living on a regular basis by going to fun and educational destinations they haven’t seen before.

- **Managing referrals:** Our social work interns and Site Managers connect families to needed services with our trusted partners who provide child care, computers, housing, employment, training, clothing, eyeglasses, therapy, and other critical needs.

- **Hosting special visitors:** We bring new ideas, experiences, and energy to our children. Favorite visitors this year included yoga instructors, birds of prey, step teams, a NASA astronaut, musicians, and more!

- **Providing holiday parties, gifts, and Halloween costumes:** Our programs are designed to bring joy to families amidst crisis. We offer birthday presents and Halloween costumes to every child, and personalized holiday gifts that parents present to their children.

- **Meeting material needs:** From strollers and potty chairs to school uniforms, backpacks, and school supplies—thanks to our network of donors and supporters, Playtime is able to make the connections and meet a range of immediate needs quickly and efficiently.

- **Advocating:** Playtime parents, staff, and volunteers speak out about the need for affordable housing and shelter funding to ensure services that prevent homelessness and help families return to self-sufficiency remain a priority each budget season.
Some of our field trips in 2014

• Temple Hills Skate Palace
• Lucky Strikes Bowling Alley
• Operation Pretty and Polished
• James Creek Marina
• Gravenstein Haunted House
• Newseum
• Oxon Hill Farm
• Maryland Science Center

What do parents like about our programs?

A network of support for children and their families

When two-year-old Lily first moved into a shelter with her family, her mother was the only one who ever heard her speak. Playtime volunteers encouraged and prompted Lily to express herself, but she was mute, trusting only her mother with her thoughts and feelings. Though Lily was developing a strong bond with her mother, she was missing out on the social and vocabulary skills crucial to early childhood development. After assessing Lily, Playtime’s Site Manager shared her concerns with Lily’s mother and referred the family to the Strong Start DC Early Intervention Program, which provides therapeutic services and resources for infants and toddlers with developmental delays.

Over the next few months, Lily began to open up to Playtime volunteers, trying out her new communication skills through narrated play. She grew more comfortable and confident in her abilities, slowly adding more and more words to her vocabulary. Four months after she first enrolled in Strong Start, you can find Lily standing proudly in the middle of the Playroom, elephant puppet on hand, narrating a story for an audience of volunteers. “I always knew my daughter was smart, but I was the only one she talked to. Now I know she’s being exposed to so many new words, and I am so proud of her,” said her mother.

What the parents have to say:

“Before [coming to Playtime] she would never let strangers know how smart she was, now she sings, counts, and tells endless stories.”

“It is awesome. The kids love it and it’s a great way to discover new things. A form of therapy.”

“It’s a great program. My daughter loves to read and [when I come to pick her up] she always has a different staff member reading to her.”

“Excellent enrichment program that helps our teens to be leaders and point them in the right direction.”

“She loves Playtime and is always excited when Tuesday gets here. It’s really good for her.”

“Playtime helps me relax while attending the parenting class, so I can open up more and not get sidetracked because of the children.”
Why do teens come to Playtime’s Teen Night at DC General?

We surveyed our Teen Night participants, and 70% said they felt like the program gave them the academic help they needed to reach their goals.

Playtime’s teen program at DC General works closely around participants’ school engagement by serving as a liaison between the family and the school. One student, a 15-year-old boy, was struggling in school because he often skipped class, causing him to miss assignments and do poorly on exams. After speaking with the teen and getting to know him through our program, we learned that he was a very smart, engaged student whose academic challenges did not reflect the positive behavior we saw in our program.

After connecting with his parents and the school, we learned that he was missing class due to a lack of resources for the dress code. Once we were able to help him obtain the necessary clothing and a new school ID, he started going to classes regularly and was able to make up his assignments by working with our program. His counselor stated by email, “I haven’t had a chance to ask his teachers this week, but I’m guessing they’ve noticed an improvement as well. Thanks again for your teamwork on this. It is so truly refreshing.”

What the teens have to say:

“Teen Night is great because we hang out and make good food.”

“My best friends are at Teen Night.”

“Some nights actually feel like a party, and we get to do stuff I’ve never done before.”

“I’ve learned a lot about science activities and art projects.”

“I like when we get to cook, because I don’t know how to make a lot of foods. But now I know how to make hummus, smoothies, and salsa and guacamole.”

“I liked coming to teen night last year because I got extra help with things I wasn’t sure of in school.”
Spotlight volunteer: Jackie Hartzler

Our volunteers are our greatest resource. But they get as much as they give—and Jackie’s experience illustrates that.

Jackie is a volunteer at Playtime’s sites at DASH, DC General, and the playground. Her background is impressive: she is a pediatrician, taught children’s karate, worked in a children’s recreation department, and worked with the National Health Service Corps in urban and rural clinics.

But even with all that experience, Jackie’s most important asset is her direct, yet easygoing, way with children. In her volunteer work with Playtime, she’s shown that simply giving consistent, undivided attention to a child who has gone through a major loss can make them come alive with joy.

What is your favorite memory at Playtime?

My fondest memory is of a child who I played with for several weeks. He was having a hard time controlling his anger and was very nonverbal. I never even heard him say a full sentence. He would point, grunt, and occasionally say a phrase. After a few weeks, the tantrums became less frequent, but there were still certain triggers that produced tantrums. He was very sensitive and became upset if someone showed interest in a toy that he was holding—it was almost a preemptive meltdown to discourage anyone from taking his toy.

One day, as we sat at a table looking at a book, a favorite toy inside a little bag lay beside him. Before I knew what was happening, another child grabbed the toy. It was all in slow motion; I couldn’t react fast enough to stop it. I started repeating the versions of the phrase: “We need to use words.” I had said this a hundred times, but it never seemed to do any good. Right in the middle of launching over the table, this little boy suddenly sat back down in his chair, looked at the other child and said, “Could you put my toy back in my bag...please.” And we continued reading our book.

At that point, I was completely nonverbal. He is such an amazing child.

What do you want readers to understand about Playtime?

Volunteers are sharing their time and energy at Playtime; we aren’t giving up our time and energy. We are not sacrificing saintly do-gooders. We get as much as the kids get. The volunteers are building and enjoying healthy relationships with an amazing bunch of incredible kids at a very fun place. I am not saying that it is not hard work, but Playtime enriches everyone’s life. It is truly a privilege and an honor to come to Playtime.
Thanks to our supporters

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