



**Families Deserve Housing • Children Deserve Play •**  
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**Committee on Human Services Hearing on the  
“Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act of 2010”  
Testimony of Jamila Larson, LICSW  
Homeless Children’s Playtime Project**

*November 8, 2010*

My name is Jamila Larson and I am the Executive Director of the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project where I come to you today on behalf of children in families who experience homelessness in our city. Our mission is to nurture healthy child development and reduce the effects of trauma among children living in temporary housing programs in the District of Columbia by providing them a positive outlet where they live.

Since the last time I came before you, there have been some welcome improvements in our ability to run our children’s program at D.C. General. We appreciate the support of your office, DHS and TCP in helping us secure space to create two new playrooms. Thanks to your initiative in convening a meeting of providers at CYITC, we’ve gained some new partners like the Literacy Lab and Boys and Girls Club which have really made a difference for the children we serve.

As our cadre of volunteers prepares for another winter, we are concerned about this bill’s elimination of the longstanding health and safety protections for families by removing the requirement that family shelter be “apartment style.” This law was put in place for a reason, recognizing the developmental vulnerabilities that children have, making it detrimental to shelter more than one family in the same room. This must always be the standard that our city moves towards, even as budget decisions make it more difficult to do so during times like these.

Last winter we shared our playroom with a mother and her newborn twins in that second floor cafeteria surrounded by strangers and elementary-age children struggling to concentrate while doing their homework amidst rows of cots. Children have complained to us about their inability to fall asleep at night because it was so loud in that room, compromising their ability to focus in school. Teachers often notice a change in behavior, emotional instability, and an impact on readiness to learn among children who go home to communal-style shelter. If we’re serious about education reform, we have to look at the conditions where children wake up and prepare for their school day, and return to do their homework each night.

The safety issues this arrangement presents are well-documented from years past and the developmental and emotional damage for the children can be lasting. By removing the limit on the number of families that can be placed together in a communal sleeping arrangement, sharing eating and bathroom facilities, I fear we are setting ourselves up for a repeat of last winter at D.C. General.

Living in a shelter is scary enough; please keep it a child's right to sleep surrounded only by people he or she knows and loves, so we do not make it easier for our city to cut corners in the years ahead. We look forward to continuing to work with you to increase protections for children, not take them away from our most vulnerable residents. Thank you for your support of our efforts; we hope we can count on your leadership to do what's best for children in our community.