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Committee on Human Services

Roundtable on the “Status of the 2010-2011 Winter Plan”

Testimony of Ashley Wiegner, Site Coordinator

Homeless Children’s Playtime Project

October 6, 2010

My name is Ashley Wiegner and I am a Site Coordinator for the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project at the D.C. General Emergency Family Shelter. I come to you today on behalf of the growing numbers of children in our city whose families are homeless. Over the past 14 months I’ve been a volunteer, I’ve met so many incredible, bright and beautiful children who call DC General home for the weeks and months their families reside there. I want to thank you for the work you are doing to provide shelter for the kids in our program.

While the conditions at D.C. General are far from ideal, an old hospital next to a prison, we all know the incredible capacity children have to adapt and overcome challenging situations. The children I meet each week are incredibly resilient. And this past winter their resiliency was certainly tested. I watched as the shelter became more chaotic and unsafe as families were packed into rooms and the already tight space became unbearable. As we learned this winter, there are limits to people’s resiliency. To the city’s credit, important changes were made in March to try to improve the conditions after several serious issues surfaced over the many months D.C. General was overcrowded.

After the lessons learned from last winter and with the new statistics on child poverty, we need to do the math. There are 7,000 additional poor children in D.C. this year, many of whom teeter at the edge of family homelessness. The winter plan only allocates 10 additional emergency shelter units at D.C. General, 29 transitional units for young families and 151 additional housing units for families. What is going to happen when those slots fill up? There is no plan for if the need exceeds the plan. You do the math with 7,000

Rather than expanding D.C. General beyond its capacity of 135 families, we support increasing permanent housing options for Tier 1 families and opening up smaller temporary shelter programs integrated in the community. We were encouraged to learn of an alternative shelter option on Spring Road, but are deeply concerned that politics seem to be derailing this plan. Our citizens deserve a straight answer from the city why this option seems to no longer be on the table. Someone needs to take a tough stand against NIMBY-ism and do what is right for the children of the District of Columbia. They deserve to recover from crisis in a *neighborhood*, and no one councilmember should have the power to prevent this opportunity for families.

While we can all agree we do not want to repeat the history of last winter, I do not want to see families being turned away as they are now because we failed to use the facts in front of us to do what is right and allocate enough space for the growing population of homeless children. The families I meet are grateful that they are not

sleeping on the streets. If improvements are not made to the Winter Plan, I am concerned that we will have a far greater crisis on our hands this winter.

We hope we can count on your strong leadership. Thank you for your consideration!