



DC Council Committee on Human Services Hearing
Testimony of the Homeless Children's Playtime Project
May 22, 2020

Good morning, Councilmember Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council as it reviews the proposed Fiscal Year 2021 budget for the Department of Human Services. I am Jamila Larson, Executive Director and co-founder of the Homeless Children's Playtime Project.

The Playtime Project is a long-time partner of shelters across the District. Our mission is to cultivate resilience in children experiencing family homelessness by providing and expanding access to transformative play experiences. Right now, that means play kits delivered every few weeks to children in four shelter settings where Covid has meant confinement to a single room. We've provided video content, Parent Survival Guides with activities and crisis resources, and established an emergency fund to address immediate needs like food insecurity, moving expenses, and critical referrals to services.

I want to begin by highlighting some positive partnerships that have delivered real results for children, including the **investment in shuttle bus service** to help students living in the overflow shelter hotels get to school, and **computer access for students**. Ensuring students experiencing homelessness have access to basic educational rights have been the result of a lot of hard work and inter-agency collaboration that deserves praise. *We hope that when schools re-open, the shuttle schedule will be much more convenient as families have requested and that shelters and schools will work together to tighten the safety net to ensure no homeless student falls through the cracks.*

Our primary recommendation to strengthen the 2021 budget is to ensure that the city's stated commitment to ending homelessness using the Aspen Institute's Two Generation approach be embodied in official documents such as the **Interagency Council's Strategic Plan to End Homelessness and in the DHS Strategic Objectives and Performance Indicators**. Currently, the unique needs of children are not clearly reflected in these important guideposts. As a result, children and youth in most DC family shelter settings are not receiving comprehensive case management services tailored to their needs. We must close these gaps and address these inconsistencies if we're serious about ending family homelessness. *Children must be seen as customers, too, because we know the #1 predictor of homelessness as an adult is homelessness as a child.*

We support the recommendation of DC Action for Children for DHS to plan how it might study the best way to ensure **children's services coordination** is provided in all family shelter settings, as offered by My Sister's Place, SOME and Friendship Place, for example. Whether a child enters the system through the door of Days Inn or one of the beautiful new ward-based sites, that child should expect consistent prioritization of their needs across all settings. This starts with a child Needs Assessments to determine their social-emotional, physical, developmental and educational needs. Then a service plan is put in

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place with wrap-around supports with services that can begin immediately as well as follow them into housing. Strengthening the deliverables for children will be an investment that will pay off 10-fold.

DHS measures the success of the goal to “**Develop an effective system of care for families...**” by the numbers of those who become homeless for the first time, length of time in shelter, and numbers returning to homelessness within 6-12 months. But there are so many more indicators that would make sense to measure to monitor the quality of an *effective system of care*, including housing status after 24 or 36 months, ratio of case managers to families, qualifications of case managers which is related to quality, percentage of children enrolled in services, etc. Montgomery County, for example, requires case managers be social workers with caseloads of no more than 12 families they must connect with at least twice weekly, which they’ve found has made a huge difference. It also makes sense to include the numbers of families in STFH sites in the TCP shelter census so we can get a complete picture.

We’re also concerned that the Performance Indicator to “implement a system of **services and supports** for youth, parenting youth and their families” focuses solely on unaccompanied youth. Obviously this population is important, but the data show us that nearly half of these youth were in the family homeless system as children, who need prevention and intervention now.

Finally, the Performance Indicator to implement a **Two Generation** approach only focuses on income maintenance through TANF when we know the integrity of the concept includes so much more. Early Childhood Education and Development is one of the five pillars of the approach. Investing in prevention, health and wellness, such as parenting support, is another. DC’s Child Fatality Review Committee finds a disproportionate number of deaths in the homeless family system. More common are parents lacking the natural social supports needed to raise children. Parenting while homeless is extremely challenging, and we know parents are in the best position to prevent and treat ACEs for their children if given the tools and support to do so. Now that homeless families are confined to a single room with no recreational outlets, we are very concerned about family mental health, social isolation, child development, and parent and child stress.

Family homelessness will not decline if we fail to invest in services for children and parent support. We’re not going to get the ROI the Aspen Institute promises if we just follow parts of the model. We must do all we can to prevent children from becoming homeless teens or heads of household, and right now that’s just not happening consistently. We hope that **prevention and intervention for children** in homeless families is prioritized in future Performance Plans. We look forward to helping you ensure that families have the tools they need to not just survive and exit shelter but to thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our recommendations and for your efforts to ensure the safety and wellbeing of some of the District’s most vulnerable and resilient families during this challenging time.

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