



Families Deserve Housing • Children Deserve Play •
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Committee on Human Services
DHS Performance Oversight Hearing
Testimony of Jamila Larson, LICSW
Homeless Children's Playtime Project

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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 the growing numbers of children in our city whose families are homeless. For the past six years, the Playtime Project has been providing the only weekly children's programs at five family homeless shelters and transitional housing programs in the District of Columbia. This includes D.C. General Emergency Family Hypothermia Shelter, New Beginnings Shelter on Park Road, the Salvation Army's Turning Point Program, Community of Hope's Hope Apartments and Northwest Church Family Network.

Our nonprofit organization has never taken any government funds and we are committed to being a good partner to the shelters that DHS oversees. On behalf of the approximately 300 children who currently live in D.C. General, I would like to focus my testimony on our programming at this facility and share observations with you about the quality of services that our taxpayer dollars are funding.

Conditions of Concern

- **An increased need must be met with increased beds:** We are puzzled by the fact that DHS has made clear it will not be opening up any more shelter space even as jurisdictions across the country have had to respond accordingly to the growing wave of family homelessness. Having to choose between shelter and housing is a false choice; our city needs more of both.
- **There is serious overcrowding at D.C. General** with up to 20 families sleeping together in the second floor cafeteria, some on cots and air mattresses. This creates a stressful situation for families who are already in crisis and we notice tensions are high and children are anxious.
- **There is no designated space for the children:** We have had to fight for the children to have access to a playroom and be kids as the overcrowding worsened. There was no communication from Families Forward as we kept losing our space from week-to-week. This has been stressful for the children and is disrespectful to our partnership to not know where we were going to hold our program. DHS is in the process of helping us identify a temporary space.
- **The lack of services at D.C. General** mean that mothers fleeing violence for example and children experiencing the trauma of losing their home and everything familiar receive little support and are left to cope on their own. If we really want to end the cycle of family homelessness and move people out of shelter, we need to provide appropriate referrals and high-quality case management to connect them with the help they need.

“Belinda,” for example, is an 18-year-old mother at D.C. General who was abused as a child. She is not in school and is not aware of any kind of case plan. When a transitional housing program that we partner with came to recruit young mothers at D.C. General, Families Forward staff referred only one parent. Belinda was not informed of this opportunity. There is no reason why this young woman, who has been at the shelter for months, should not be connected with all the services she is eligible for in order to help her get out of shelter, go back to school and become independent.

Recommendations

- **Without spending a dime, more community partnerships need to be fostered.** There are a wealth of existing programs and services that could be provided in the shelters that are not. As a community partner, I have found it extremely difficult to find a staff person at D.C. General who returns my calls and is a reliable link to providing our services. I am confident that there are other quality programs that would welcome the opportunity to provide mentoring, tutoring, and other services at no greater cost to the District than a warm welcome and a willingness to coordinate in an organized and respectful way. There is no reason why every child at D.C. General should not be connected with a tutor and a mentor but that is not happening. I cannot think of any excuse good enough to explain to this talented, bright, hopeful group of young people (who also happen to be a captive audience) why they don’t have more programs than what our group of volunteers provides.
- **Staff training and management needs to improve** to increase the quality and quantity of the referrals and case management services that families receive. As the numbers of families have increased at D.C. General, the number of staff have not. With the intensity of needs that these families undoubtedly bring, it is critical to ensure the staff is qualified, trained, and supported.
- **All children entering the family intake center need to be assessed for their developmental, educational, and psychological needs and receive appropriate referrals.** Homelessness is a symptom of a constellation of problems facing a family and represents an optimal time to intervene given the serious risk factors homeless children face. The Inspector General’s Report in April 2009 on the investigation into the deaths of the Jacks-Fogle children, cited data from the National Center on Family Homelessness that *“children experiencing homelessness are sick four times more often than other children, have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral health problems compared to non-homeless children, and are four times more likely to display delayed development. These statistics demonstrate a strong need for assessing the physical and emotional needs of children who have recently experienced or are experiencing homelessness.”*

The Inspector General further recommended that *“the DC Department of Human Services consider proposing to the Mayor a strategy with funding requirements, milestone completion dates and clearly assigned accountability for the provision of physical, mental health, and developmental screenings to all children known to be homeless.”* We have approached the Department of Human Services about our willingness to help with this process. A better assessment and case coordination system is needed upfront to help prevent the crisis of homelessness from turning into the tragedy of child abuse or other preventable and costly problems.

Warehousing vulnerable families in over-crowded, under-staffed facilities without providing quality services is not a good use of taxpayer funds to effectively address the growing crisis of family homelessness. The children need a safe space to play and do their homework. They need quality educational and mental health services to help support them during this challenging time. We know

the risk factors that children in homeless families face. We know their numbers are growing. But these children are still invisible, still not worthy of investment beyond being sheltered from the cold. For the primarily black children who become homeless in the same city as our first black president, they are offered a cot and a hot meal, then they are then on their own.

For young people struggling to integrate homelessness into their life stories, we are expecting them to beat the odds with almost no support. When we take fifteen teenagers from D.C. General to visit President Obama later this month in the West Wing, what will they tell him about how much the city believes in the possibility of their dreams? It's our turn to show them that we believe in helping all children reach their potential, no matter where they live.