

**Department of Human Services Oversight Hearing  
Testimony of Jamila Larson, LICSW  
National Center for Children and Families**

February 19, 2009

My name is Jamila Larson and I am a social worker and Community School Director for the J.C. Nalle Elementary School with the National Center for Children and Families. At J.C. Nalle we provide mental health services, an afterschool program and parent outreach activities to remove barriers to learning for children and provide opportunities for strengthening families and the Ward 7 community that we serve. I come to you today on behalf of the growing numbers of children in our city whose families become homeless.

We admire the commitment from DHS and the City Council to homeless children and families as evidenced by visits to and closure of D.C. Village. Then Human Services Committee Chair Adrian Fenty sent a powerful message when he brought colleagues from the City Council there to listen to the families and communicate, “You deserve better from your city government.” We share your commitment to working harder to ensure the system fulfils its mission to help homeless families find safety and stability. We applaud your desire to move more homeless families into affordable housing as the need continues to grow.

So far this school year, **462** homeless students have been registered in D.C., which is twice as many as the same time last year. (*Washington Post, February 8, 2009*) We are concerned that our shared vision for responsive city government is being compromised in the way emergency shelter for families is being delivered. We acknowledge the city’s financial reality but the way that our tax dollars are being spent at D.C. General Emergency Family Shelter is not producing the results we all want for the most vulnerable children and families in our city. Community partners like the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project that provide free services have not been asked to return to the shelter after the cycle of openings and closings happen seemingly under a shroud of secrecy.

A nine-year-old boy who currently resides at D.C.’s communal-style hypothermia family shelter at D.C. General drew this picture. He shares a room with his mother, his brother who has a disability, and his five-month-old baby sister. There is no bathroom in their room and when he wakes up in the middle of the night, he is too fearful to go down the hallway to use the bathroom. His picture represents how he feels when he is at the shelter, which includes a depiction of him wetting himself, feeling scared and wanting to run away. The red represents where he feels anger in his body.

*This is not the way it has to be.* No programs for children, no recreation, no computers or outings to get families out of the cramped quarters, shared bathrooms and eating spaces and crowded conditions. Children have nothing constructive to do and are scared and reportedly

getting sick from the food and the close proximity of living with so many other families. Many of the children have been exposed to trauma and they need services to help them recover from the stress of homelessness. I know you agree that shelter stays should help children heal, not traumatize them even more. While we all look forward to the day there will be no need for shelters, we know that for many children and families escaping abuse, violence, and other unsafe living conditions, shelters provide a lifeline during times of crisis. Some children become victims of sexual abuse and other horrors as they live double and tripled up with family members and neighbors as they wait for housing. The answer is not as simple as closing shelters.

We ask that as you are assembling your homeless services plan, that children become a priority. The thousands of children who are a part of homeless families in our community are too young to make decisions about their own health and welfare and are in this situation through no fault of their own. We ask that you:

- 1.) **Visit D.C. General** and see the conditions as you did with D.C. Village. This would mean a great deal to the residents there to see how much you care firsthand. Then we invite you to visit a model program like Greentree Shelter in Bethesda run by the National Center for Children and Families to see what shelters look like that nurture child development and family stability.
- 2.) **Assess each child** who is part of a homeless family to identify their unique needs and make prompt referrals to respond to those needs. Currently there are no questions about children on the assessment tool, despite the disproportionate risk homeless children face for developmental and psychological problems.
- 3.) **Raise the standards for city contracts:** We ask that the city require agencies with whom it contracts to provide comprehensive services to families beyond the provision of food and beds and that treat families with the compassion and respect that they deserve.

We look forward to meeting with your staff to come up with solutions to help homeless children in our city who need our protection and support during times of crisis. The economic and affordable housing crisis in our city is not the fault of our children and they need your leadership more than ever.

Thank you for your attention.

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