

District of Columbia City Council Human Services Committee
Department of Human Services Oversight Hearing
Testimony of Jamila Larson, LICSW
Homeless Children's Playtime Project

March 11, 2011

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 children who participate in our weekly programs in five shelters and transitional housing programs in our city. Our mission is to nurture healthy child development and reduce the effects of trauma among children living in shelters in the District of Columbia by providing them a positive outlet to be kids. Our organization asks for no government funds for our own operations, but the 500 children we serve each year depend on DHS-funded shelters and housing programs to protect them from living on the streets of our nation's capital.

I have three primary concerns to bring to your attention today:

- 1.) We need more information about plans to reduce capacity at D.C. General and how children and families on the waiting list will be impacted,
- 2.) There are many ways to balance the budget without harming vulnerable children who need a roof over their head; what will be the impact of any cuts to DHS?
- 3.) Who will the provider at D.C. General and Park Road be so we know who to partner with to help enhance family support services at the shelters?

Capacity at D.C. General

While nobody wants to live in a shelter, I can tell you what a lifeline it is for children, especially during this time of economic crisis when homelessness among families has risen steadily each year in our city. I am concerned about the possibility of DHS emptying out D.C. General before hypothermia season this fall. This would leave more families without shelter this spring and summer than last year when D.C. General was always full. That means more children sleeping with their families under overpasses, in metro busses and other public places.

As a social worker in DCPS for five years, I saw many children in my office who were sexually abused while living doubled and tripled up with other households because their families could not get into shelter. Homelessness is not a season; it is not worse during the winter, so it makes no sense to tell a child that because her family became homeless in March rather than February that her city will not help them.

Children whose families become homeless need shelter regardless of what the temperature is outside.

Balancing the Budget

I understand that all agencies have been asked to find budget items to cut due to the city's debt, but putting more children in danger would not be consistent with the Mayor or Council's goals to protect the safety of the most vulnerable residents and to promote jobs and education. Making more families homeless is not an ethical way to balance the budget. It is very difficult for a single parent to hold down a job and for her children to learn in school without a roof over their heads. We need leadership that "gets" these critically important connections.

The newspaper is filled every day with examples of how our city leaders are not giving up adult luxuries, yet we are asking the most vulnerable among us to tighten their belts. There are hundreds of ways that our city can save money while not harming innocent children or making life more difficult for the parents struggling to raise them. For example, the Council needs to pass the necessary implementing legislation to ensure corporations pay their fair share of taxes by requiring "combined reporting" which would save the District \$20 million.

Partnering with the Provider

We would like more information about DHS's delay in announcing the family shelter contractor for D.C. General, Park Road, and the Family Intake Center. The Community Partnership has been a much better partner than the previous provider that was ousted, but we need to know if this is a permanent rather than a temporary arrangement. As DHS is considering providers, it's essential that the organization they select has a broad vision for strengthening families rather than just sheltering them, the expertise to provide therapeutic programming, and the capacity to partner with community organizations that bring additional resources to the table.

There are many more services we would like to see in the shelters that would help families exit the system faster and learn new skills while they are there. We have been asked by parents to help them find jobs, housing, legal, parenting, tutoring and services for their children. Our unpaid Masters-level social work intern provides assessments and referrals for parents every week at D.C. General and Park Road. I wish I could say this was a duplication of services, but the parents are grateful for this assistance that they are not always receiving from their caseworkers. We see the need for research-based parenting support groups in the shelters to help reduce parental stress and prevent child abuse and neglect. A more aggressive, quality, and comprehensive case management system could help reduce the backlog in the shelter system.

Progress has been made at D.C. General thanks to the leadership of TCP and DHS, but more collaboration is needed to better protect the safety of the children and the wellbeing of the families. We hope we can count on the Council and the Department of Human Services to hold fast to a budget that does not ask homeless children to sacrifice in tough economic times. Please help ensure that a tough budget year does not mean an even tougher childhood for thousands of children who depend on DHS programs to take their families in when they are homeless, not turn them away with no safe place to go.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership.