

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the City Administrator



**A Plan to Close DC General: Short-Term Family Housing in All 8 Wards
Ward 4**

**Testimony of
Rashad Young
City Administrator**

**Before the
Board of Zoning Adjustment**

**Tuesday, June 28 2016
DC Office of Zoning
441 4th Street, NW – Suite 200S
Washington, D.C. 20001**

Good morning, Chairperson Heath and members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment. I am Rashad Young, City Administrator. I am joined today by Laura Zeilinger, Director of the Department of Human Services (DHS). I am pleased to be here this morning to request relief from the Board for three development projects that are ready to move forward, with the remaining projects to be presented in the future which will help advance the shared agenda of Mayor Bowser, the Council of the District of Columbia and many District residents, advocates and stakeholders – closing DC General, the largest family shelter in the District.

One of the highest priorities of the Bowser Administration is to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. Over the past five years, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the District has continued to rise. More than 7,000 men, women, and children experience homelessness on any given night. On the campaign trail and throughout the transition, Mayor Bowser promised District residents that she would develop “smaller shelter alternatives and ultimately close DC General.” We know what it takes to end homelessness in the District and we have a roadmap to get us there – Homeward DC, the Interagency Council on Homelessness’ (ICH) strategic plan, for which I serve as Chair, which was written and approved by Administration officials and community members in March 2015. In the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 budget, the Bowser Administration with support from the Council made its first down payment on Homeward DC, a historic and unprecedented investment in proven solutions to end homelessness through providing robust services, investment in permanent supportive housing and our rapid rehousing program. In the FY 2017 budget, collectively we have continued this investment, in addition to expanding targeted affordable housing programs and Council’s new pilot program that will assist low-income households with continuing to pay their rent despite month-to month income fluctuations.



Homeward DC calls for the development of smaller scale, service-enriched, community-based shelters – and the closure of DC General Family Shelter. In a city as prosperous as ours, we can and must do better by children and families experiencing homelessness. It is the right thing to do. DC General is not a place for families. Continuing to house families at this facility does not reflect the values that we share for how to serve and support our most vulnerable residents, especially families with children, many of whom are under the age of four.

Widespread Support

When Mayor Bowser was elected she heard loud and clear from the community that closing DC General was a priority. More than 12,000 residents across the District signed the pledge affirming their commitment to ending homelessness – and closing and replacing DC General with smaller, more dignified private-room short-term housing for families across the District. And Mayor Bowser committed to doing just that. To achieve this goal, the Mayor needed to identify smaller community-based sites to develop as facilities for families.

An All Eight Ward Strategy

We wanted the entire community to be a part of the solution – so we searched for one site in every single Ward. In order to close DC General, we needed between 270 and 280 units – across all eight Wards. We needed roughly 30,000 gross square feet per site, close to public transportation and other services and amenities, and sites that are economically feasible – and able to be developed within a 24-30 month timeline. We started by looking at District-owned properties in the city’s inventory. Once we had exhausted that inventory based on our criteria, we looked for properties to purchase or lease. With the amendments of the Council as of June 13th of this year, all proposed sites will now be District owned. Each new facility will be small, dignified, and will accommodate up to 50 families.



The Ward 4 property is currently privately owned. However per Council legislation the Administration was directed to purchase or use eminent domain to acquire this privately owned site. We are working with the owner to purchase said property.

Community Engagement & Transparency

On February 9th, Mayor Bowser shared her plan with the Council and the public. Two days later, the Bowser Administration fanned out across the District, holding community meetings in all eight wards to share the site plans with residents and respond to questions and concerns. This was the first step in a multi-year community engagement process. Since the initial community meetings, members of the Administration have met with neighborhood leaders, conducted neighborhood safety walks, participated in subsequent community meetings, shared designs, solicited feedback on community advisory committees and responded to dozens of e-mails and phone calls to answer questions, discuss concerns and resolve issues. On our website, mayor.dc.gov/homewarddc, we have included information about our plan to close DC General, as well as responses to Council and neighborhood concerns.

Over the next couple of weeks, we intend to create advisory bodies in each neighborhood to (1) provide feedback on concerns related to quality of life during construction, (2) disseminate information to other neighbors and constituent groups, and (3) work with the partners to develop Good Neighbor Agreements. The Good Neighbor Agreements will address 1) maintenance of property 2) community safety 3) neighborhood codes of conduct and communication and mutual respect.



Council Support

The Council held a public hearing on the Mayor's legislation on March 17, 2016, and on May 16, 2016, announced and voted on several revisions to the original plan, including changing 3 of the 8 sites. The plan for the Ward 4 site, however, remains unchanged, except that the Council has authorized the Mayor to acquire the site for this purpose. The Council finalized the plan, which included their revisions, by unanimous vote on May 31, 2016.

BZA Relief

For the selected site in Ward 4, we request the board grant us special exception relief for the construction of an Emergency Shelter in this designated C-2-A zone. In addition, we request the following area variance relief to construct an addition to a non-conforming structure that already exceeds the maximum permitted height and will exceed the maximum permitted density. The aforementioned requests are necessary to ensure that the building can be ADA compliant between the old and new parts and meet the programmatic requirements of Homeward DC.

As a collective, we have worked to achieve minimum if no substantial detriment to the public good or zone plan, while working to meet the Administration's, Council's and District residents' goal of creating an achievable and tangible plan to close DC General in the foreseeable future and replace it with smaller, safe and dignified short-term family housing across all 8 wards. I want to take a moment to address – from a high level – neighborhood impact. These short-term family housing facilities are residential facilities like your home, condo or apartment. Research suggests that adding a facility of this type to a neighborhood has no adverse impacts property values or crime. In some cases, as we are proposing to do at the Ward 4 site, adding a facility to a vacant property has increased adjacent property values and decreased crime.



Furthermore, we have spent significant time making sure that this housing will be great for the families living there, but also making sure it will fit into each neighborhood. We have hired architects who have developed high quality designs and ensure that the construction is also high quality. The District has set this precedent. Many of you are probably familiar with La Casa, a permanent supportive housing site in Columbia Heights for formerly homeless men. La Casa is sandwiched in between upscale condos and apartments and has won several architectural awards in the past several years. It is an asset in the community. We intend to achieve the same with these new sites. We'll establish a Good Neighbor Agreement with the residents who live nearby to ensure that we are living up to our collective expectations.

Closing

This is an exciting time. All of the pieces are in place. We have a clear plan. We have committed the funds. We have support from the community. And we have the political will to make this happen. We have begun and plan to continue an extensive community engagement process. It is critical that the BZA approve the relief we seek today, so that we can move this plan forward to close DC General because our residents deserve better.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I will now turn to Director Zeilinger to talk about the programmatic aspects of the facilities. I am also happy to take any questions. Thank you.

