

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**



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

Ward 3 – 3320 Idaho Avenue, NW

**Testimony of
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Before the

Board of Zoning Adjustment

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

Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson Hill and members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment. I am Laura Zeilinger, Director of the District Department of Human Services, and I am pleased to be here this morning to request relief from the Board for the Short-Term Family Housing program at 3320 Idaho Avenue, NW, which will help advance the shared agenda of Mayor Bowser, the Council of the District of Columbia and many, many District residents, advocates and stakeholders – closing DC General. I am here to testify on behalf of my agency, but also to provide my expert opinion on the issues of homelessness and emergency shelter programming for families with minor children.

Before I joined Mayor Bowser’s Administration, I served as President Obama’s lead official in the effort to end and prevent homelessness nationwide as the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. In that role, I traveled to virtually every major US City, working with innovators and thought-leaders from across the country to investigate and share which strategies work to end homelessness and which ones don’t. Coming back to work for the city I call home, I joined my colleague Kristy Greenwalt, Director of the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness and a nationally recognized expert on homelessness, to incorporate those best-practices and evidence-based models from across the country into our five-year plan to end homelessness in DC, “Homeward DC.” With the Council’s support, we are bringing those solutions to scale, system-wide. One of Homeward DC’s many important strategies is to close DC General and replace it with smaller, more dignified emergency shelters where families can reside safely and securely, and be better supported to move into permanent housing quickly. We need approximately 280 family units to accomplish this goal. The City’s goal is to close DC General by the 2019-20 hypothermia season and we have a plan to achieve



that goal. The temporal aspect of this goal is critical in implementing the plan from a cost perspective, as well as, the immediate need to provide families with children who are experiencing the crisis of homelessness with suitable shelter.

Emergency homelessness in the District

The District is one of only a handful of jurisdictions in the United States that has a legal requirement and policy that ensures access to emergency shelter for families who become homeless. This means that if a family no longer has a safe place to live, they can come to the District's Virginia Williams Family Resource Center, and after completing the eligibility process, the District will provide safe shelter to them on an emergency basis – right then and there. Residents found to be eligible are able to bring personal belongings, but any large furniture must be placed in storage or with another person.

Closing and replacing DC general is one critical component of a larger reform effort that has included creating a robust homelessness prevention program, enhanced standards for case management and service delivery across program types and an expansion of programs that support families to exit homelessness to permanent housing. Through these initiatives, in just the last two years we have prevented more than 2,700 households from entering shelter and increased the number of families who are exiting homelessness to permanent housing by 50 percent. The need for these services, supports and shelters, however, is only growing and the only way we will be successful in creating a system that works is if we are able to see the reform all the way through.

In DC, the families who experience homelessness are overwhelmingly young mothers with infant children. Close to fifty percent of the families we serve in emergency shelter are headed by a parent 24 years of age or younger. Often, a pregnancy or birth of a child is the event



that precipitates homelessness, because what was likely a precarious living situation to begin with now becomes untenable with a small child or multiple children to care for.

Shortcomings of DC General

We have seen time and time again, first with DC Village, and now with DC General, that large facilities or campuses congregating hundreds of our families simply do not work. Generally, these types of facilities are inefficient, chaotic and often do little to alleviate the trauma families experience upon becoming homeless. More specifically, DC General is an aging hospital building that is not an appropriate place to house families. The unpredictability that comes with sharing space with so many people can exacerbate trauma and necessitates exceedingly strict controls to maintain safety. These factors produce an environment that can lead to toxic stress, and have lasting negative impacts on the healthy development of children and the well-being of the family as whole. We know that while people across the community have differences of opinion on a great many things, there is an overwhelming sense of shared responsibility to right this wrong and serve families experiencing homelessness in an environment that supports them to thrive.

8-Ward Strategy

The plan to close DC General and replace it with smaller, service-enriched emergency family shelters in every part of the city is borne from best practices that have been incorporated into DC laws. As experts in this field, we know from research and experience that families do better when they can navigate the crisis of homelessness in places that are purposefully designed to feel dignified, predictable and safe. Instead of being isolated, programs should be incorporated into the surrounding community, and reinforce the hope and aspirations parents have for themselves and their children. Each project presented here today helps us achieve these goals.



Spreading the programs across all eight wards both demonstrates a citywide sense of solidarity with these families and permits families to more actively participate in community life.

Clarification of Terms

The Opposition Counsel’s filing has attempted to blur the definition of this program, the zoning regulations and the Homeless Services Reform Act to assert a faulty argument.

The project before you fits clearly into the zoning definition of emergency shelter. As the Director of DHS all of the social service programs that I administer are governed not under zoning regulations but under the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA)¹. HSRA is the District legislation that establishes the requirements for the delivery of publicly-funded homeless services.

Although the services we are providing fit the legal and technical definitions of “emergency shelter for zoning purposes” and “temporary” housing under HSRA, we have publicized these facilities and the program as “*Short-term Family Housing*.” We do this for two reasons: (1) to reduce the stigma that families, especially children can experience when living in a “shelter,” and (2) to convey that we are offering a supportive program for residents that is respectful and harmonious with the variety of housing types in the surrounding community.

The District’s Continuum of Care for people experiencing homelessness is funded and governed by local and federal authorities. DHS’s Short-term Family Housing programs are subject to the HSRA requirements related to “temporary shelter” for families. In the HSRA, the District establishes heightened standards for the provision of shelter services for families. The term “temporary shelter” is intended to establish standards that are different from what the District’s “low barrier” shelter programs. Both “temporary shelter” and “low barrier shelter” fall

¹ D.C. Law 16-0035 was enacted by the Council on August 3, 2005, and the law became effective on November 11, 2005.



within the umbrellas of the federal law under US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD’s) definition of “emergency shelter” – which includes “any facility, the primary purpose of which is to provide a temporary shelter for the homeless in general or for specific populations of the homeless and which does not require occupants to sign leases or occupancy agreements.”²

The Zoning Regulation’s definition of Emergency Shelter includes “a facility providing temporary housing” defined by the HSRA. The proposed use of the Project before you at Idoa Avenue is a facility providing temporary housing under the HSRA and fits wholly into the zoning definition despite the publicized name of “Short Term Housing Facility.”

Services in each facility

The purpose of an emergency shelter is to provide immediate safety and to quickly support families to end an episode of homelessness by accessing stable housing. We also know that families have better outcomes – meaning they are able to access permanent housing more quickly – when services and supports are co-located in the emergency shelter buildings. To provide on-site services, we need space. The Short-term Family Housing programs will include dedicated spaces for private meetings for on-site wrap-around services that provide connections to permanent housing programs, housing search assistance, credit counseling and budgeting. Each program employs social work staff who also help parents navigate a range of needs such as childcare, health care, training and employment services. Programs take a multigenerational approach, bringing in services that provide early childhood screenings and supports administered by the Office of the State Superintendent for Education’s (OSSE’s) school liaisons, as well as supports that strengthen parenting and help families to overcome trauma. To adequately meet the day-to-day needs of program participants, there will be space for computer labs, laundry,

² *Code of Federal Regulations*, Emergency Shelter Component, title 24, sec. 576.102.



common living rooms and microwaves. Meals are delivered in vans twice daily. The program facilities are necessarily designed to provide much more than just simple sleeping and living accommodations. The prior-approved projects in Wards 4, 7 and 8 have located these service areas on the ground floor, which provides natural light through windows which is conducive to creating and maintaining a warm and welcoming environment in which to engage families.

Shelter Scale

In order to accomplish the City's goal of providing quality emergency shelter programs, the proposed smaller-scale is a critical factor so that services and supports can be delivered more effectively and with a on each unique family and family member. The scale of the proposed sites, between 46 to 50 families, offers the right balance between effective and efficient service delivery and creating a quiet, familial setting where families can thrive. Also, the size of the proposed sites is necessary to achieve the legislative goal of replacing DC General with facilities for 280 families. We also have found that emergency shelters of this size harmonize and integrate with the community. In DC, we have other small-scale family programs roughly the size and scale of the applications that you see before you today that integrate seamlessly into the surrounding community. Many neighbors have significant pride for the program in their community and play a part in their success. Anecdotally, I've also met many people who don't even realize that a homeless program is operating just down the street or right around the corner from their homes or offices.

Programmatic Needs Driving Design

We are excited by this opportunity to develop the Project before you today because programs will allow us to structure design details with our families' needs in mind. Each design



element in this concept is a critical piece of the array of services needed to empower our families and assist them in locating and moving to permanent housing.

Design Guidelines

I would like to briefly mention some of the key design guidelines that we used in planning this program.

1. 10 Units or Less Per Floor

Research has shown that limiting the number of families per floor to ten or fewer allows families to have more privacy, less noise, less turbulence in the hallways, a more predictable environment and an appropriate community feel. Also, a maximum of 10 units per floor is ideal to allow families to provide the proper amount of attention to young children, whom, as we all know have a great deal of energy. This scale also permits the common rooms on each floor to feel more like community living rooms than anonymous cafeterias or auditoriums. Further, our families come into emergency shelter and exit emergency shelter with very few belongings, so sleeping units and common spaces are all fully furnished.

2. Safety – Straight Hallway

Each floor will ideally be designed to have a direct line of site down the floor's single central hallway. This choice is intentional to keep personal safety at the fore-front of the building plan by removing corner hiding places. This allows the program operator to ensure safety while also mitigating the need for other more intrusive-feeling security measures.

3. Safety – Limited Access

In addition, building residents will have limited access to other floors, and will only be issued keys for their particular floor. Again, this reinforces the goal of security and predictability



of environment for the families by ensuring that only persons residing on a floor may access the floor.

4. Safety - Secure Bathrooms

In an effort to balance both costs and personal safety, we opted against congregate, dormitory-style bathrooms and instead plan for locking hallway bathrooms that only accommodate one person at a time. There is at least one private full bathroom for every two family units, with some rooms including en-suite private bathrooms to accommodate families with special needs. For families that do not have an in-room bathroom, bathroom access is available through the hallway in immediate proximity and within sightlines of families' rooms. This allows for more flexibility, meaning that families are not tied to specific restrooms, so that an open restroom will be available when it is needed, while also allowing parents to keep a watchful eye on their children.

5. Safety – Security Personnel

With a security desk on each floor 24-hours per day, staff will be present to monitor activities in common areas and the hallway to ensure that only persons who are living on a floor are actually on the floor, that families have access to the common areas that they need and maintain an overall peaceful environment.

Community Engagement

Following DC City Council legislation determining the DC General replacement sites, the Department of Human Services worked in partnership with Councilmembers and ANCs to establish membership and the formation of representative community stakeholder bodies, “Community Advisory Teams.” The Ward 3 Community Advisory Team began meeting in September 2016 to ensure that the community’s voice was represented beginning with the design



phase of the emergency shelter. Each Advisory Team is Co-Chaired by the ANC Chair or his or her designee along with a senior representative from the Administration. In Ward 3, I have served as the Administration Co-Chair, with many stakeholders from around the community.

Advisory Teams were charged with coordinating community feedback and input opportunities on all issues and concerns related to the development of the program. Recognizing that each community is unique but would follow the same general process for community input, the Administration laid out the five core milestones that each Advisory Team would be charged with achieving: (1) Advisory Team formation; (2) design presentation and input; (3) pre-BZA submission presentation; (4) final design and construction timeline presentation; and (5) develop Good Neighbor Agreement. In Ward 3, over the course of six months and five meetings, we have achieved four of five milestones and are beginning conversations about the development of a Good Neighbor Agreement.

In addition to the Advisory Team Meetings, the Administration hosted and participated in more than a dozen meetings to share information and respond to community concerns including but not limited to six well-attended public meetings, an orientation for new ANC Commissioners, multiple visits to the program site and a site visit to another program in our Continuum of Care. We are pleased that through this outreach, a majority of the ANC members were able to support the shelter use on the proposed site.

When residents raised concerns about a the siting of the Short-term Family Housing program and a potential negative impact on the District's ability to respond quickly in an emergency, then-Interim Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) Chief Peter Newsham and Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA) Director Christ Geldart joined public and Advisory Team meetings to address these issues. When residents raised



concerns about the personal vehicles of MPD officer's being parked in the neighborhood, DGS responded to those concerns by proposing an additional level of parking be added to the parking deck, eliminating the District's need for parking relief and adding a benefit to the community by reducing a long-standing community concern about parking in the neighborhood. In response to community concerns about the location of the shelter's on-site playground, the Architect has also revised designs to move the playground and trash away from the adjacent single family home.

We have heard the concern regarding the height and the project architect was able to reduce the site from 72 feet down to 69 feet. While we have been able to compromise on many other elements, the six stories and size of the project before you is critical to meeting the City's goals, complying with the programmatic needs of DHS and accomplishing the objective to making homelessness brief and rare.

The relief we seek today is one of multiple steps in the phased process of completed these facilities. Next week, the Advisory Team will meet with the District of Columbia Public School's (DCPS) Chief Operating Officer, Carla Watson, and the principal of the in-boundary elementary school, Eaton Elementary School. DCPS has expressed its confidence in the ability of each of its schools to serve every child, no matter their circumstance.

Our next milestone with the Advisory Team is to develop a Good Neighbor Agreement, which will be an agreement between the Shelter's service provider and the Advisory Team on behalf of the community to set forth expectations and commitments regarding exterior facility and landscape maintenance, safety and security, mutual codes of conduct and respect, and clear and expedient process for communication and problem solving. The agreement will also set forth clear expectations for ongoing Advisory Team engagement and coordination. We will also work through the Advisory Team to address concerns related to the construction phase of the project.



As you can see, the community engagement process in Ward 3 was robust, the ANC and Advisory Team were thoughtful and the District was responsive to concerns raised by the community. We have also submitted a schedule of community engagement for the record.

Concluding Remarks

We are excited by this opportunity to translate industry standards in human empowerment into practice by proposing building designs that will enable DC to support our families and accomplish the City's goals and objectives. Thank you for this opportunity to present this Project and ask this Board to grant the relief because without the requested relief we cannot fulfill our goals and families will unfairly have to endure at DC General longer than anticipated.

