

February 28, 2017

Attn: Frederick Hill, Chairman
Board of Zoning Adjustment
441 4th St NW, Suite 210S
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Chairperson Hill,

I am the Director for Family and Youth Homelessness at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, where I have worked over the last 16 years. The National Alliance to End Homelessness is an organization solely dedicated to advancing solutions to ending homelessness. We analyze data to identify the most promising solutions, we provide capacity building assistance to localities to implement the most effective approaches, and work at the federal level to expand resources and improve policies to end homelessness. Before joining the Alliance, I provided frontline services in a community based drop-in center for people experiencing street and chronic homelessness in Richmond, VA. I hold a bachelor's degree, masters and a Ph.D. in Social Work.

In my role at the Alliance, I was invited by the Department of Human Services and the District Interagency Council on Homelessness to serve on a Committee tasked with providing input into the Emergency Shelter Redesign Plan. The Committee consisted of diverse stakeholders who met and engaged in discussion over an approximate two month period to offer input into the shelter redesign plan. The Committee took into account the safety and privacy needs of families, including families that include a person with a disability and those with long histories of trauma, the pragmatic concerns around staffing levels, and a desire to achieve efficiency to allow maximum investments in permanent housing solutions.

In my capacity at the Alliance, I can say that I was very impressed with the process that DC Interagency Council on Homelessness and Department of Human Services undertook to get input from community stakeholders in the Design Committee. They shared information with the members who balanced program needs, costs and the merits of various options before making their recommendations. The option of securing an additional building to allow for fewer units per building was considered by the group and rejected largely due to the costs it would incur – both in diverting funds that would be better utilized in providing housing assistance to help families escape homelessness and the human costs associated with delays in closing DC General. The proposal to have ten families to a floor and fifty families to a building was endorsed by this group, which concluded it struck a reasonable balance of providing safety, privacy, comfort and efficiency.

We know that Emergency Shelters alone are not the answer to family homeless but they are a critical component. What communities must do is ensure that they have a place for families in crisis to go, so that no family is denied shelter and is forced to sleep outdoors or in an abandoned building. Emergency Shelter programs must be safe and appropriate for children and families, but they should not be intended or designed to be long-term residences. Instead the programs must seek efficiency so they retain maximum resources to invest in financial assistance and case management services to help families transition back into housing in the community quickly.

As an expert on family homelessness, I believe that the design for the Ward 5 Emergency Shelter located at 1700 Rhode Island Avenue, NE, is a reasonable one and was developed with careful attention to balancing the safety and privacy needs of families, and the need to develop an efficient crisis response system that is primarily designed around helping families exit homelessness quickly. Importantly, I think it is a design that, in conjunction with other anticipated interventions, will allow the District to provide year-round access to shelter to families in crisis without relying on costly motels. I strongly support the work done by the Committee and have great confidence in the leadership of DC Department of Human Services and the Interagency Council on Homelessness. It is an appropriate and balanced approach that will enable the City to make progress in addressing families experiencing homelessness.

As such, I fully support the Emergency Shelter and I hope that the Board of Zoning Adjustment can support this project as well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. McDonald', is written over a horizontal line.

Sharon McDonald, Ph.D.
National Alliance to End Homelessness
Director for Family and Youth Homelessness