

**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 6  
850 Delaware Ave SW

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Board of Zoning Adjustment

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DC Office of Zoning  
441 4<sup>th</sup> Street, NW – Suite 200S  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Good morning, Chairperson Hill and members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment. I am Rashad Young, City Administrator. I am pleased to be here today to request special exception and variance relief from the Board for the development and operation of an emergency shelter in Ward 6 located at 850 Delaware Ave SW, 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. I am joined today by a team of subject matter experts, who will each speak to their skill area:

- Director of the Department of Human Services, Laura Zeilinger; and
- Director of the Department of General Services, Greer Gillis

The principal architect and the Traffic Engineer for this project will also provide testimony.

### **Overall Program Goals and Purpose**

One of the highest priorities of the Bowser Administration is to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. More than 7,000 men, women, and children experience homelessness on any given night. On the campaign trail and throughout her 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. The Interagency Council on Homelessness’ (ICH), for which I serve as Chair, is charged with informing and guiding the District’s strategies and policies for meeting the needs of individuals and families who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. In March 2015, the ICH, along with Administration officials and community members worked to develop Homeward DC, the District’s strategic plan to end homelessness. In both the Fiscal Year 2016 and 2017 budgets, the Bowser Administration with support from the Council has made historic and unprecedented investments in proven solutions to end homelessness through providing



robust services, investment in permanent supportive housing and our rapid rehousing program. Over the past two years, the Department of Human Services has undergone major systems reform in alignment with the strategic plan. We are starting to see the results of both the systems reform and the investments. In 2015, we assisted 1,075 families exit from shelters, which was a 29 percent increase from the prior year. In 2016, there were 1,269 exits resulting in a 49 percent increase from the prior year. We also reduced the number of families in our emergency family shelters by 17 percent from January 2016 to January 2017.

Homeward DC also calls for the development of smaller scale, service-enriched, community-based shelters and the closure of DC General Family Shelter. In the District and across the country, best practices show that families can be more successful when shelter is provided in smaller, neighborhood-based settings where programming can be tailored to meet the needs of clients and where clients can more readily access services and support networks in the community. 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.

### **An All Eight Ward Strategy**

When Mayor Bowser was elected she heard loud and clear from the community that closing DC General was a priority. 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 a minimum of 280 units across all eight Wards that are economically feasible and able to be developed within a 24-30 month timeline. The sites needed to be close to metrobus



transportation and other services and amenities. 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. On June 13, 2016, the Council of the District of Columbia amended the law and changed three of the selected sites, in Wards 3, 5, and 6, to District-owned property.

### **Short Term Family Housing in Ward 6**

The proposed Ward 6 emergency shelter site that is before you today is across the street from the previously-selected emergency shelter site at 700 Delaware Avenue, SW, and will include 50 units of short term family housing with space for ongoing support services. The project will also include a matter-of-right medical care facility on the cellar level, with access from the first floor level, as well as adequate on-site parking and loading for the site's proposed uses. This proposal to construct a new seven-story emergency shelter at this site is a critical element of the District's eight-ward initiative to developing a more effective crisis response system.

### **Community Engagement & Transparency**

On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 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. As I mentioned earlier in my testimony, the Ward 6 emergency shelter site, as well as the sites for Wards 3 and 5, were changed as a result of the Council's legislation last June 13, requiring new site plans and designs. Since the time that the three new sites were selected, members of the Administration have met with neighborhood leaders, conducted neighborhood safety walks, participated in



subsequent community meetings, shared designs, and responded to hundreds of e-mails and phone calls to answer questions, discuss concerns and resolve issues. At these sites, we also had the opportunity to form Community Advisory Teams, which have coordinated community feedback and input and shared information on issues and concerns related to the development of the program, and weighed in on building designs to help ensure that they reflected the character of each neighborhood. On our website, [mayor.dc.gov/homewarddc](http://mayor.dc.gov/homewarddc), we have included information about our plan to close DC General, as well as responses to Council and written responses to neighborhood concerns.

The work of our Community Advisory Teams will not end after today's BZA hearing. There are ongoing discussions about specific concerns in each community that will continue and they will also provide feedback on concerns related to resident quality of life during construction and help develop Good Neighbor Agreements for each program. 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 Council finalized the plan, which included their revisions, by unanimous vote on May 31, 2016. The plan was then transmitted to the Mayor on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and was returned to Council to be enacted on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Recognizing their critical role in site selection and Ward representation, we have invited Councilmembers to participate in the Advisory Teams and all have hosted their own community conversations about the program.

### **BZA Relief**



We came to you over the summer to seek relief for the sites in Wards 4, 7, and 8. Because you granted us this relief, I am excited to share that we are on track to begin construction on these sites this summer. The site before you today is the site we have selected in Ward 6. For Ward 6, we request that the Board grant us special exception relief for the construction of an Emergency Shelter in the RF-1 District for more than 15 persons and for a partial reduction in the number of required parking spaces. In addition, we request variance relief for a building height greater than three stories and 35 ft.

The architect, the traffic engineer and the zoning attorney for the Ward 6 site will delve into the specifics on the details of the special exception and variance request for this emergency shelter. 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. Research suggests that adding a facility of this type to a neighborhood rarely impacts property values or crime. In some cases, 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, and the Ward 6 site is actually designed by the same architect. We hope to achieve the same with these new sites. Our Good Neighbor Agreements with the residents who live nearby will help us 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 worked with 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.

