

**Testimony of Amanda Korber  
Staff Attorney, Housing Unit  
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**

**Before the Committee on Human Services  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding the Department of Human Services**

**March 8, 2018**

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia<sup>1</sup> submits this testimony to discuss our serious concerns with the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Rapid Rehousing Program (RRH). Over the years, Legal Aid has testified repeatedly about the significant flaws in the RRH program. These flaws have made the program ineffective and, in many cases, affirmatively harmful to the families RRH purports to serve. Legal Aid has testified about changes DHS could implement to modestly improve Rapid Rehousing. For example, we have suggested that DHS, or the Council by statute, make each participant's portion of the rent actually affordable by setting it at 30% of their income and decreasing the all-too-common delays between when tenants report income losses and when DHS adjusts their rent. However, even when confronted with modest proposals for change, DHS and the Council have done nothing to address these serious flaws in the RRH program.

Today, Legal Aid is testifying not to reiterate the ways that this Council and DHS can make these much-needed, but frankly insufficient, changes to the RRH program. Instead, we submit this testimony to state our most pressing concern – the fact that RRH exists at all. We urge this Council to reallocate the millions of local dollars that are currently being spent on RRH to other programs which actually serve to create sustainable, safe, and affordable housing for the District's lowest-income residents.

**THE RAPID REHOUSING PROGRAM LEADS TO HOUSING INSTABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS**

Too often, RRH leaves families worse off than they were when they entered the program and cycles them back into homelessness, this time saddled with debts from apartments they could not afford. At the Rapid Rehousing Roundtable on December 14, 2017, DHS's own Laura Zeilinger said: "[I]t is the minority of families, who through assistance in the [RRH] program, are able to fully afford their rent at the conclusion of the subsidy." This sad reality is borne out by DHS's own data. According to DHS's oversight responses, in FY17, the average family's income

---

<sup>1</sup> The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia was formed in 1932 to "provide legal aid and counsel to indigent persons in civil law matters and to encourage measures by which the law may better protect and serve their needs." For more than 80 years, Legal Aid attorneys and volunteers have served tens of thousands of the District's neediest residents. Legal Aid currently works in the areas of housing, family, public benefits, consumer, and appellate law. More information about Legal Aid can be obtained from our website, [www.LegalAidDC.org](http://www.LegalAidDC.org), and our blog, [www.MakingJusticeReal.org](http://www.MakingJusticeReal.org).

at the time of exit from the RRH program was \$541 per month.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the average rent for a family in the program living in a two-bedroom apartment in that same year was \$1,712.10.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising that of all the families that exited RRH in FY17, only 11% (or 83 families) did so because they could afford market rent.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these alarming statistics, and the fact that that the agency does not even know how many families are evicted after exiting the RRH program,<sup>5</sup> DHS declared in its oversight responses that RRH prevented 89% of families from returning to homelessness.<sup>6</sup> This is where the Council, must step in and challenge DHS. If only 11% families can afford their rent when they exit the RRH program, but only 17% are transitioning into permanent subsidy programs, what is happening to the majority of these families? The answer is sad and simple: they are being evicted and they are being displaced.

As Legal Aid testified at the Roundtable, being evicted, or forcibly displaced – meaning having to move out of necessity rather than choice – is traumatizing for families, and gravely harms parents, children and the community at large. As Matthew Desmond explains in his book *Evicted*, when a family is evicted they lose all of their possessions, children lose their schools, and parents lose the time and money they spent creating a home for their family. Eviction also takes a toll on mental health, and leads to higher rates of suicide and depression. Finally, eviction and displacement destabilize entire communities. When community members are being cyclically forced from their homes, there is little incentive to invest and contribute to their neighborhoods and communities. Why spend time planting roots when you know you will be forced out in a year? The District should not be investing its resources into a program that makes families and communities worse off. Yet, that is exactly what the DC government is doing year after year when it invests in Rapid Rehousing instead of sustainable affordable housing.

## **THE HOMELESSNESS AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED**

DHS continually states that the homeless services system cannot solve the affordable housing crisis and that we must think of these two crises separately. It makes sense that DHS says this; DHS serves people who are homeless and does not specialize in examining or addressing the root causes of homelessness by creating and preserving affordable housing. And it is far less complicated to report on reductions in the number of families in shelter than to dive into the messy outcomes that families experience once they're out of the RRH program and left to figure out their housing situations on their own. For these reasons, DHS continually reports that RRH is a success despite its own statistics, which suggest that transitioning from RRH to paying market in one or two years just is not possible for the average family. But, it is the job of this Council to view homelessness within the larger context, and to ensure that the District's money is being used in a way that meaningfully provides families with truly permanent, safe, and affordable housing. This

---

<sup>2</sup> Department of Human Services, Performance Oversight Questions, at 78

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 82-83.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 83.

means that the Council must pivot away from funding Rapid Rehousing, and instead invest the District's resources into long-term housing programs and policies that will help families thrive.

While Legal Aid agrees that no one should live for an extended period of time in shelter, Rapid Rehousing is hurting families. Families that exit the RRH program are too often displaced from yet another place they called home, and, to make matters worse, these families now have new debts and an eviction on their records. Instead of investing in short-term housing solutions to keep shelter numbers down, we urge the Council to reexamine its choices, stop funding a program that causes real harm to real families, and to invest more dollars in permanent housing subsidies like the Local Rent Supplement Program and Targeted Affordable Housing.