

**Testimony of Lucy Newton
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**

**Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs
Council of the District of Columbia**

**District of Columbia Housing Authority
2009 Fiscal Year Budget Hearing**

April 23, 2008

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia¹ encourages the Council to increase funding to the D.C. Housing Authority, and particularly for the Local Rent Supplement Program. Now in its second year, the Rent Supplement Program has brought more than one thousand families out of homelessness and into decent and affordable housing.

However, the sharp increase in the cost of housing in the District of Columbia means that the Program requires increased funding in order simply to continue to house the families it currently serves. In order to expand the program to more families – as was recommended by the Comprehensive Housing Strategy Task Force and the Homeless No More Plan – the Housing Authority requires an even greater financial commitment from the District.

We urge the Council to help DCHA grow the Rent Supplement Program so it can serve more of the thousands of D.C. residents in need. At a minimum, in order for the Program to continue to support those families currently receiving subsidies, the Council must increase funding over FY 2008 in an amount sufficient to cover the rising cost of housing in the District.

The Rent Supplement Program helps the District's most vulnerable residents achieve housing stability.

For D.C.'s lowest-income families, finding and maintaining housing is next to impossible without supplemental help. The fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit in the District of Columbia is \$1,324 per month.² To afford an apartment at this rent, a household would have to make \$52,960 in a year – well more than the annual earnings of D.C.'s low-income renters. A disabled individual receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), at \$637 per month, can afford a monthly rent of only \$191.

¹ 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.” Over the last 75 years, tens of thousands of the District’s neediest residents have been served by Legal Aid staff and volunteers. Legal Aid currently works in the following three priority areas: housing, family law, and public benefits.

² National Low Income Housing Coalition, Out of Reach 2007-2008 (available at www.nlihc.org/oor2008).

High housing prices also squeeze D.C.'s working families. A person earning minimum wage would need to work 145 hours per week for 52 weeks a year in order to afford a two-bedroom unit at the fair market rent, while a person working the standard full-time job – 40 hours per week – would need to earn \$25.46 per hour to afford a two-bedroom unit for herself and her family.

For low-earning residents, the D.C. Housing Authority's programs are the first, last, and often only place to turn. The Rent Supplement Program has so far allowed the agency – which already serves more than 20,000 of the District's neediest families – to house more than 1,000 new families from its waiting list.

For D.C.'s low-income households, obtaining a housing subsidy can mean the difference between stability and chaos. Securing affordable housing relieves the monthly struggle to meet rent payments – a struggle that can quickly spiral into eviction and displacement. Rent supplements also help residents obtain and keep jobs. Research has shown that former welfare recipients who have housing assistance are far more likely to remain off the welfare rolls than those with no assistance.³ Stable housing prevents the disruption that arises from frequent displacement, which is detrimental to maintaining steady employment. Housing stability also improves outcomes for children by reducing the poor performance and increased dropout risk that result from frequent moves.

More funding is necessary to continue to support those families already receiving assistance and to increase the number of families served by the Program.

The District has seen a sharp decline in the number of affordable rental units. According to the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, from 2000 to 2004 the District lost 7,500 units renting at less than \$500 per month and lost 15,000 units renting for between \$500 and \$1000 per month. There is an enormous unmet need for affordable housing in the District, as evidenced by the lengthy waiting list for the Housing Authority's subsidized housing programs.

At the time the Rent Supplement Program was conceived two years ago, the annual cost of supporting a voucher was \$12,000 per year. Because of rising housing costs, that number has increased to \$15,700 per year per voucher. The Housing Authority requires an increase in funding over last fiscal year merely to maintain its current number of vouchers.

Currently, nearly 50,000 people are on DCHA's waiting list for housing, approximately 20,000 of whom are homeless. Given this context, adequately funding the current number of vouchers is a good start – but we must do more. In order to make a meaningful dent in those numbers, the Comprehensive Housing Strategy Task Force Report recommended that the District fund 1,000 additional vouchers each year for the next fifteen years.

³ Barbara Sard and Margy Waller, Housing Strategies to Strengthen Welfare Policy and Support Working Families (Research Brief of the Brookings Institution and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities) (April 2002), at 6.

Currently, the Mayor's budget does not include any increase in funding for the Rent Supplement Program. Flat-funding the program effectively means that the Housing Authority cannot support even the number of families it currently serves. We urge the Council to give DCHA the funding it needs – not merely to maintain its current number of vouchers, but to increase the number of individuals and families it lifts out of homelessness and into decent and affordable housing.