



**Testimony of Deborah Cuevas Hill  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**

**Committee on Housing and Workforce Development  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Public Hearing on  
Bill 18-863 - Rental Housing Commission Reform Amendment Act of 2010  
Bill 18-864 - Rental Housing Act Extension Amendment Act of 2010  
Bill 18-1005 - District of Columbia Housing Authority Board of Commissioners Amendment Act  
of 2010**

**November 3, 2010**

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia<sup>1</sup> supports the bill before the Committee today to extend the District's rent control laws. For D.C.'s many low- and moderate-income families, rent control is the only factor maintaining housing at an affordable level. Residents searching for homes who lack the protection of rent control have great difficulty finding safe, decent, and affordable housing for themselves and their families.

**Searching for housing in today's economic climate**

D.C. is a harder place to rent than it used to be. A recent study from the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute reveals that DC's affordable housing stock has decreased by one-third since 2000.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the number of low-income families has grown, creating an ever-worsening gap between the number of low-cost homes and the families who need them.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment in DC rose from 5.5 percent in 2007 to 11.8 percent in November 2009.<sup>4</sup>

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<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." Over the last 78 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.

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, *Nowhere to Go* (Feb. 5, 2010) at 4 (available at <http://www.dcfpi.org/nowhere-to-go-as-dc-housing-costs-rise-residents-are-left-with-fewer-affordable-housing-options>). "The number of rental units with rent and utility costs of \$750 or less fell from 69,000 in 2000 to 45,000 in 2007." *See id.* Housing is generally considered "affordable" if it costs no more than 30 percent of the household income. *See id.*

<sup>3</sup> "The number of residents living in deep poverty — meaning they live below *half* of the poverty line, or just under \$11,000 for a family of four — rose from 8 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2009." D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, *New Census Data Reveal the Uneven Impact the Recession has had on the District* (Sept. 28, 2010) (available at <http://www.dcfpi.org/new-census-data-reveal-the-uneven-impact-the-recession-has-had-on-the-district>).

<sup>4</sup> *Nowhere to Go* at 11.

The increase in rents has the severest impact on those families who are forced to move from one unit to another. The average monthly rent in the District has risen 23 percent since 2000.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, a renter who loses a rent-controlled unit faces a double burden. In addition to losing the family's home, the cost of finding a new one will likely involve a significant increase over the prior rent level.

A recent DC Fiscal Policy Institute study found that nearly all low-income DC households have unaffordable housing costs.<sup>6</sup> A person earning a minimum wage of \$8.25 per hour would need to work 153 hours per week to afford the 2010 fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment.<sup>7</sup> A person working the standard full-time job – 40 hours per week – would need to earn \$28.73 per hour to afford a two-bedroom unit for herself and her family.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, a household would have to have 3.5 full-time wage earners to afford a two-bedroom unit.<sup>9</sup>

For families bearing these rent burdens, each month presents a new struggle to make ends meet. Many renters find that one two-week paycheck will not cover the month's rent, let alone leave money for food, utilities, and other needs. To resolve this problem, individuals often pay rent late or in installments, thereby incurring late fees and risking eviction. It is not uncommon for people to be sued month after month in landlord-tenant court based on late rent payments. This precarious situation places families at virtually constant risk of eviction if they cannot "catch up" by the end of the month.

### **The lack of governmental assistance**

Currently, the District's rent control laws represent the most widespread public commitment to aiding low- and moderate-income families by maintaining rent at an affordable level. D.C.'s other main source of housing assistance – the federally funded D.C. Housing Authority – cannot come close to meeting the current housing need. For families struggling with housing burdens, receiving public or subsidized housing is simply not a real option. The current waiting list for public housing or housing vouchers is 26,000.<sup>10</sup> In our experience, we have had homeless clients wait for approximately two to three years before receiving housing. For those who are not homeless, the wait for public and subsidized housing can be indefinite.

### **Tenant protections make a difference.**

For D.C.'s low-income households, keeping an affordable, rent-controlled housing unit can mean the difference between stability and chaos. Maintaining affordable housing relieves

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<sup>5</sup> *Nowhere to Go* at 4

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

<sup>7</sup> Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development, *An Affordable Continuum of Housing . . . Key to a Better City*, at 16 (available at [http://www.cnhed.org/download/123321\\_U127242\\_\\_746634/Continuum%20of%20Housing%20Report.pdf](http://www.cnhed.org/download/123321_U127242__746634/Continuum%20of%20Housing%20Report.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *An Affordable Continuum of Housing* at 3.

the monthly struggle to meet rent payments – a struggle that can quickly spiral into eviction and displacement.

Affordable housing also helps residents obtain and keep jobs. Studies have indicated that former welfare recipients who have housing assistance are far more likely to remain off the welfare rolls than those with no assistance.<sup>11</sup> 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.

**The District should extend and strengthen its commitment to affordable housing.**

The District's supply of affordable housing is diminishing every day. The rent control protections found in the Rental Housing Act are crucial to tenants' ability to maintain their affordable rental units. We urge the Committee and the Council to pass a permanent extension of the Rental Housing Act.

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<sup>11</sup> 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.