



www.legalaiddc.org
1331 H Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-1161

**Testimony of Amanda Korber
Director of Policy and Community Engagement, Systemic Advocacy and
Law Reform Unit
Legal Aid DC**

**Before the Committee on Housing
Council of the District of Columbia**

Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority

April 11, 2024

Legal Aid DC¹ submits the following testimony regarding two concerns with the Mayor's proposed FY25 budget for the District of Columbia Housing Authority ("DCHA").

First, the Mayor has allocated no new money for Local Rent Supplement Program ("LRSP") vouchers that would pull families off the decades-long voucher waiting list.

Second, while we appreciate that the Mayor has allocated \$50 million for public housing repairs and maintenance in FY25 and FY26, we are concerned that we still do not know the amount of funding DCHA needs to repair and maintain all of the District's public housing units. What we do know is that the need is far greater than the Mayor has budgeted for. The Council should work with DCHA to get this information and set up a stable and predictable funding stream to meet the need.

¹ Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit www.LegalAidDC.org.

The District Should Invest in the Local Rent Supplement Program

DCHA closed its voucher waiting list on April 12, 2013.² Over ten years later there are still over 40,000 families on that list waiting for their chance at affordable housing.³ These are families that have waited at least a decade, but many far longer, for the District to make good on its oft-stated commitment to providing affordable and dignified housing for its residents. And the need for affordable housing is far greater than even that number suggests. Legal Aid works with families and individuals who are not on that list, whether it is because they were minors the last time it was open or because they did not need affordable housing in 2013 but need it now. For them, it is not a matter of waiting decades for a voucher. They may be waiting for their whole lives.

Despite all of this, the Mayor has proposed no new funding for tenant-based LRSP vouchers to pull families off this list. We understand that it is a tough budget year, but the District must make a substantial investment in its families that have been waiting far too long and bearing the brunt of competing priorities that have left them out to dry year after year.

DCHA Should Make Public the Amount of Money it Needs to Repair and Maintain All Public Housing Units

We are thankful that the Mayor included just over \$50 million for public housing in the FY25 and FY26 budgets, but we know that it is not enough. Everyone knows that public housing has been underfunded at the federal and local level for decades. Everyone also knows that public housing residents have been living in unsafe, unhealthy, and uninhabitable conditions. What we do not know is how much money DCHA actually needs today to repair and maintain its public housing stock. But, the Council should be able to work with DCHA to get this information, especially since DCHA recently conducted an audit of every public housing unit.

Once the Council has this information, it can budget for the future and ensure it puts enough money into each year's budget to meet the need. This means creating a regular

² The Washington Post, D.C. public housing waiting list to close; no new applicants after April 12, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-public-housing-waiting-list-to-close-no-new-applicants-after-april-12/2013/04/03/9cf7abe4-9c96-11e2-a941-a19bce7af755_story.html

³ DCHA's FY24 Performance Oversight Responses at p. 36.

and predictable funding stream that DCHA and its residents can count on. We understand that the Committee made progress in that direction last year by dedicating 15 percent of the deed transfer and recordation taxes to public housing repairs beginning in FY28. We also understand that that progress was undone in the Mayor's proposed budget. We hope the Committee will revisit this plan, or work on another, to ensure that DCHA receives annually the funding it needs to provide safe and dignified homes to District residents.

Of course, the Council's job does not end there. This Committee must also engage in rigorous oversight of the money it gives to DCHA. It is also incumbent on this Council to ensure that not one dollar of local money goes to displace public housing residents. To that end, the Council should: 1) make DCHA report regularly and in detail how it is spending local money; 2) ensure that DCHA replaces every public housing unit it demolishes; and 3) ensure that DCHA guarantees its residents an unequivocal right to return to their homes in a reasonable time period if relocation is necessary.

Conclusion

Thank you for considering our recommendations for DCHA's FY25 budget. We urge you to prioritize the District's lowest and no-income residents and ensure that everyone has a safe, stable, and affordable home.