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**Testimony of Eleni P. Christidis  
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**Before the Committee on Housing  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority**

**May 30, 2025**

Legal Aid DC<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA). Legal Aid urges the Housing Committee to increase voucher funding to meet federal funding shortfalls and the growing need for permanent housing subsidies, to adequately fund public housing repairs and codify public housing residents' rights into law, and to introduce its own legislation for a permanent successor to the STAR Board that includes resident-elected and housing advocate positions.

**The Council Must Significantly Increase Funding for Vouchers**

The Mayor's budget proposes funding Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) vouchers at the same level as last year. This is untenable for several reasons. Affordable housing remains out of reach for a large portion of DC residents: an estimated 44.7% of District renters are "rent burdened," meaning they pay more than 30% of their gross income to

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<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.LegalAidDC.org).

rent.<sup>2</sup> Rent burden among renters of color in DC is even higher.<sup>3</sup> And the need for more housing support appears to be growing. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) recorded a 14.1% increase from 2023 to 2024 in the number of people experiencing homelessness in the District. Inflation and rising rents<sup>4</sup> also mean that increased voucher funding is needed simply to ensure that current voucher recipients remain supported by existing programs.

In addition, federal funding for approximately 600 Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV) currently administered by the D.C. Department of Human Services (DHS) is projected to run out in FY26.<sup>5</sup> If Congress does not act,<sup>6</sup> the shortfall from the loss of EHV funding at the federal level will have to be addressed locally to ensure these families remain housed. President Trump’s proposal of a historic cut of 44% to HUD, including cutting rental

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<sup>2</sup> Connor Zielinski and Mychal Cohen, D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, “Nearly Half of All Renters and More Than Half of Black Renters in DC Struggle to Afford Rent” (April 14, 2025), available at <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/nearly-half-of-all-renters-and-more-than-half-of-black-renters-in-dc-struggle-to-afford-rent/>.

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

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Anna Helhoski, Nerdwallet, “Rent Prices Keep Rising Amid Inflation, Low Inventory” (May 14, 2025), available at <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/finance/rental-market-trends?msocid=21c14a30b375627935a35f84b227638b>; Aaron Weiner, The Washington Post, “Study: D.C. region had the highest rent increase among major metro areas” (Oct. 25, 2024), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/10/25/study-dc-region-had-highest-rent-increase-among-major-metro-areas/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Letter of Miguel A. Fontánez, Director, Housing Voucher Financial Management Division, U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (March 6, 2025), available at <https://www.nahro.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/HUD-EHV-letter-3-6-2025.pdf>. See also U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development Notice PIH 2025-07, “Emergency Housing Vouchers Leasing” (March 26, 2025), available at <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/OCHCO/documents/2025-07pihn.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See National Low Income Housing Coalition, “Congress Must Provide Sufficient Funding for Vouchers in FY26 to Continue Assisting 60,000 Households Served Through EHV Program – Take Action!” (May 19, 2025), available at <https://nlihc.org/resource/congress-must-provide-sufficient-funding-vouchers-fy26-continue-assisting-60000-households>.

assistance programs by 43%, also suggests the danger of future significant federal funding cuts for housing assistance.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the Mayor’s proposed budget intends to cut other important aspects of the social safety net.<sup>8</sup> While Legal Aid opposes these unjustified and harmful cuts, if any come to fruition, they will push even more families and individuals into needing housing assistance to remain housed. We call on the Council to reject the Mayor’s current proposals and sufficiently fund DHS and DCHA to support the growing need for housing assistance in the form of locally funded vouchers.

### **The Council Must Couple Funding for Public Housing Repairs with Greater Transparency and Legislation Guaranteeing Public Housing Residents’ Right of Return**

While we appreciate that the Mayor has committed \$52.4 million over the next two fiscal years to support vital and long delayed public housing improvements,<sup>9</sup> the Mayor’s proposed budget zeroes-out about \$7.2 million allocated in FY25 for “Affordable Housing” which we understand was to go to public housing maintenance and repairs and is distinct from capital funds. We encourage the Council to restore this funding.

At the same time, funding should be paired with increased transparency and oversight, and we request that the Council pair the restoration of funding with enhanced public reporting requirements in the Budget Support Act. We remain concerned that DCHA is taking more and more public housing units offline, allowing vacancies to increase and proliferate, and “vouchering out” public housing residents without a clear, documented guarantee of a right to return after redevelopment.

The Council should require DCHA to enhance its monthly reporting to the Council with property-level data regarding which units are becoming vacant, being leased-up, or taken offline. Aggregate numbers currently published in monthly progress reports to the Council do not tell a clear story. In addition, for residents who are being moved or

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<sup>7</sup> See *id.*

<sup>8</sup> Alex Koma, WAMU, “Bowser’s budget slashes safety net programs, reflecting tougher economic times ahead” (May 29, 2025), available at <https://wamu.org/story/25/05/29/owsers-budget-slashes-safety-net-programs-reflecting-tougher-economic-times-ahead/>.

<sup>9</sup> Along with our partners in the Fair Housing Coalition, Legal Aid recommends that this amount be increased to \$60 million. Fair Budget Coalition, FY 26 Budget Platform, [https://fairbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Desktop\\_FBC\\_FY26-Budget-Platform\\_spreads-1.pdf](https://fairbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Desktop_FBC_FY26-Budget-Platform_spreads-1.pdf).

“vouchered out” of public housing properties, DCHA needs to, at a minimum, provide documentation to each resident that clearly and explicitly guarantees those residents a right to return to the redeveloped property, and maintain regular communication with residents to make sure residents’ contact information is kept up to date. To the extent that this cannot be achieved in the Budget Support Act, we call on the Council to introduce standalone legislation codifying public housing residents’ absolute right of return (among other rights and procedural guarantees during the redevelopment process) to ensure no one is permanently displaced while waiting for the quality housing they have so long deserved, after so many years of living in deplorable conditions.

**DCHA’s Permanent Board Must Be Sufficiently Independent and Include Resident-Elected Members and a Housing Advocate**

This Council should reject the Mayor’s proposal in the RENTAL Act<sup>10</sup> to indefinitely continue the tenure of the current, emergency STAR DCHA board. Instead, this Committee should introduce its own legislation for a permanent Board that restores the direct election of resident members and the selection of a housing advocate as voting members of the Board.

The publication of the HUD report in late 2022 prompted the Council to create the temporary STAR Board, intended to last just two years, in lieu of pursuing a more comprehensive agency reform bill.<sup>11</sup> The creation of the STAR Board eliminated three resident-elected positions (replacing them with two Mayor-appointed resident positions) and eliminated a position for a housing advocate representative, among other changes.<sup>12</sup> Yet, this drastic move has not solved DCHA’s dysfunction, and DCHA continues to lack sufficient oversight and transparency for the Council, residents, or the public to fully understand DCHA’s operations, access reliable performance measures, and demand

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<sup>10</sup> Rebalancing Expectations for Neighbors, Tenants, and Landlords (RENTAL) Act of 2025 (B26-0164), available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0164>.

<sup>11</sup> See District of Columbia Housing Authority Stabilization and Reform Emergency Amendment Act of 2022 (B24-1144), available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B24-1144>.

<sup>12</sup> See District of Columbia Housing Authority Stabilization and Reform Emergency Amendment Act of 2022 (B24-1144), available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B24-1144>.

DCHA responsiveness and accountability to residents' and advocates' concerns.<sup>13</sup> Problems and extreme delays in the performance of basic agency functions persist, and the STAR Board has not led the way in advancing a reform agenda.<sup>14</sup>

Approving the RENTAL Act would perpetuate and worsen this lack of transparency and accountability by allowing the Mayor to extend, without a firm cutoff date, the current STAR Board membership; re-appoint the same members to the permanent Board without the advice or consent of the Council; and set the initial term limits of the permanent Board. Most troubling, the RENTAL Act would permanently eliminate resident-elected Board positions and eliminate a public housing resident's right (currently enshrined in the Public Housing Bill of Rights) to stand for election and vote for candidates to the Board.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, this Committee should introduce its own legislation to create a permanent DCHA board that is appointed by a combination of the Mayor, the Council, residents, and the D.C. Consortium of Legal Services Providers. This legislation must reinstate the resident-elected and housing advocate positions that were eliminated in the creation of the STAR Board. Doing so will ensure that the permanent Board better and more directly reflects the will and concerns of low- and extremely low-income residents and the advice of the tenant advocate community. Resident-elected commissioners would ensure that DCHA is not passively listening but rather directly contending with the views of residents at the moment decisions are made. In addition, a legal services representative would provide expertise in local housing law and landlord-tenant issues. This will help ensure DCHA's actions and policies comply with local requirements and landlord-tenant court rules and give the broader advocate community a voice on the Board. The reform bill introduced in late 2022 offers a good starting framework for this and many other badly needed

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<sup>13</sup> For example, important metrics of DCHA's performance, such as the average time to voucher lease-up are not published or available online.

<sup>14</sup> See Testimony of Eleni P. Christidis, Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority (March 6, 2025), available at <https://www.legalaiddc.org/media/4238/download?inline>.

<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the RENTAL Act proposes other subtle but significant changes. For example, permanent D.C. Code § 6-211(u) requires public disclosure of conflict-of-interest violations (after a majority vote of the Board); the RENTAL Act would require reporting to DCHA's general counsel first, with public disclosure being optional. Permanent D.C. Code § 6-213(c) makes the Executive Director subject to the Board's "direction and supervision," while the RENTAL Act would make the Director subject only to the "oversight" of the Board.

reforms.<sup>16</sup> However, to ensure the Board's independence, the Council must be careful to ensure that mayoral appointees constitute a minority of the board.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on our recommendations regarding DCHA's budget. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee and the Council to ensure that DCHA is adequately funded to serve its voucher and public housing residents, to pass legislation preserving public residents' rights to return to redeveloped properties, and to establish a permanent DCHA Board that is independent of the Mayor and includes resident-elected and housing advocate members.

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<sup>16</sup> See District of Columbia Housing Authority Act of 2022 (B24-1159), available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B24-1159>.