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**Testimony of Ashlei Schulz  
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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**

**April 29, 2026**

Legal Aid<sup>1</sup> submits the following testimony regarding the mayor's proposed FY2027 budget for the District of Columbia Housing Authority ("DCHA"). The Housing Unit of Legal Aid DC serves low-income tenants, many of whom rely on DCHA to maintain access to affordable and stable housing. The proposed budget's increase of DCHA's overall budget by about 15.5% over FY2026 is a welcome signal of the mayor's priorities, but as our testimony outlines, there are several areas for improvement that would benefit Legal Aid's client community.

**The Council Should Fund New Vouchers Under the Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP) and Permanent Supportive Housing**

The mayor's proposed budget adds \$27.7 million to LRSP, to make a total of \$191.5 million, representing 17 percent increase over FY2026. While the increase is welcome, the Committee should not mistake it for expansion. The proposed budget dedicates the additional funding entirely to existing vouchers.<sup>2</sup> There is no funding for new vouchers for families currently without housing. Legal Aid supports the testimony of the Fair Budget

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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).

<sup>2</sup> See Department of Human Services "FY27 Proposed Budget Overview"

Coalition, which has noted that it would take approximately \$217 million in additional subsidies to house all of DC's unhoused families. The mayor's proposed budget falls far short of that recommendation. In a climate with proposed federal rules that could impose work requirements and eliminate mixed-immigration-status households, a strong local voucher program provides a critical safety net for residents who may be cut off from federal assistance.

Relatedly, the expansion of the LRSP is only as valuable as the private market's willingness to accept vouchers. Source-of-income discrimination remains a barrier for voucher holders because enforcement is weak. Too few landlords face any consequences for illegal discrimination. Landlord also continue to engage in practices that result in disparate impact. We observe that landlords often unbundle rental charges into junk fees and non-usage related utility fees. This is especially harmful for tenants who have unfavorable credit histories or were formerly homeless. In these cases, the housing subsidy gets them into housing, but ancillary charges can push them right back out. We ask that the Committee consider pairing any increase in voucher funding with stronger enforcement of anti-source-of-income discrimination rules and rent reasonableness to address non-rent/non-utility charges.

### **The Committee Should Scrutinize DCHA's Strategy for Addressing Maintenance Needs in Public Housing**

The proposed budget suggests that the capital budget increase by 21 percent to \$31.8 million. This is a modest improvement given the scale of maintenance needs across DCHA's portfolio. The Committee should scrutinize the dollar amount as well as the strategy for repairs.

DCHA's public housing stock is in a well-documented state of disrepair. Our clients live with mold, broken heating and cooling systems, pest infestations, and inoperable elevators. Legal Aid has serious questions about how repairs will be funded going forward. The Committee should push for clarity on this before finalizing the budget.

The increasing use of Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) and Section 18 dispositions to address DCHA's aging housing stock carries real risks. Vouchering out public housing units converts them from permanent affordable housing to units that can be privately owned. Doing so trades a landlord whose legal obligation is to provide housing as a public function for a private landlord whose objective is to make a profit.

This makes it structurally harder for tenants to enforce maintenance requests and contest rental increases.<sup>3</sup>

Legal Aid's concern is with tenant rights and the right to return. DCHA has a poor reputation for administrative follow-through, as the oversight record demonstrates. It is reasonable to foresee that residents displaced by renovation or conversion will struggle to exercise their right to return due to inadequate agency communication or agency disorganization. The dispositions risk exposing DCHA public housing residents to the same recurring issues as other DCHA voucher participants. DCHA has insufficient (or insufficiently trained) staff to keep track of each resident, let alone manage their displacement and prompt return properly.

### **Legal Aid DC Remains Concerned About DCHA Administration, Including Leadership and Audits**

DCHA continues to struggle with governance. Departing Executive Director Keith Pettigrew was the fourth DCHA executive director in just six years. This Committee should resist any suggestion that yet another grace period is warranted due to the appointment of Interim Director Nicole Wickliffe. Tenants cannot wait year after year for change while DCHA operates in a perpetual state of transition.

Discussion of the budget also raises concerns with internal audit findings from the last several months. DCHA's Chief Compliance Officer documented over \$60 million in alleged financial mismanagement, including tens of millions in unapproved transfers from the repair and maintenance fund, stale checks totaling \$2 million, and voucher payments made on behalf of deceased residents.<sup>4</sup> The CCO herself was placed on administrative leave after raising these concerns, and has filed a whistleblower lawsuit. The interim audit chief's final report is still forthcoming. The Committee should demand that the final report be made public in full and that any misdirected funds be recovered and restored to their intended purpose, especially funds intended for repairs.

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<sup>3</sup> See Catherine Bishop & David Rammler, "Testimony to United States House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity Hearing on Legislative Proposals to Preserve Public Housing" *National Housing Law Project*, April 28, 2010. Available Online at <https://www.nhlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/8-NHLP-Testimony-Final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Aubrey Butterfield, "DCHA addresses alleged financial mismanagement at city roundtable" Street Sense Media. Available online at <https://streetsensemedia.org/article/dcha-adresses-finances/>

On the issue of staffing, the ratio of housing specialists to voucher units remains deeply inadequate: 57 specialists for nearly 20,000 units means a single specialist carries roughly 350 cases.<sup>5</sup> Tenants frequently wait weeks to have calls returned, even in urgent situations. We often see tenants who are waiting for a response to interim recertification requests while paying well above their income; tenants waiting for emergency transfer vouchers to escape domestic violence; and families who lose out on potential lease-ups while their paperwork sits unaddressed. Any meaningful budget should include dedicated funding to hire, train, and retain adequate housing specialist staff, with a publicly stated caseload target.

### **DCHA Should Revise the Harmful Proposed Changes to its Housing Choice Voucher Program’s Administrative Plan**

DCHA’s proposed final Administrative Plan<sup>6</sup> raises concerns that this Committee should monitor closely in conjunction with the budget. First, the proposed 7-year lookback period for drug-related offenses and prior convictions exceed the 3-year lookback period recommended by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).<sup>7</sup> DCHA’s expanded exclusion of tenants with drug-related offenses will bar a significant number of otherwise-eligible applicants from accessing vouchers. It also stands to perpetuate deep racial and class inequities. The Council should push DCHA to bring its lookback period into conformity with HUD guidance, not exceed it.

Second, the administration of the federal voucher waitlist demands attention. DCHA reports that there are nearly 17,000 residents waiting an average of 11-15 years on the waitlist<sup>8</sup>. DCHA’s proposed Administrative Plan moves to random selection to place vouchers from the waitlist instead of going in order of the date and time that applications were submitted. Given DCHA’s track record, the Council should establish clear reporting requirements on how waitlist changes are implemented and communicated to the thousands of families currently waiting.

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<sup>5</sup> Aubrey Butterfield, “What you missed at the D.C. Housing Authority council oversight hearing” Street Sense Media. Available online at <https://streetsensemedia.org/article/d-c-housing-authority-oversight-hearing/>

<sup>6</sup> See Proposed Final Administrative Plan, dated November 18, 2025 available online at <https://www.dchousing.org/wordpress/about-us/administrative-plan/>

<sup>7</sup> See 24 C.F.R. § 960.204 (a)(1)

<sup>8</sup> See DCHA Oversight Responses, available online at <https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FY2026-DCHA-Pre-Hearing-Responses.pdf>

## Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on our recommendations regarding DCHA's budget. We look forward to working with the Committee and the Council in furtherance of the following requests:

- Allocate new funding for LRSP vouchers for currently unhoused families, consistent with the Fair Budget Coalition's recommendation of \$60 million to DCHA and \$217 million system-wide.
- Pair LRSP expansion with stronger source-of-income discrimination enforcement and enforce the prohibition of unbundled rental charges.
- Require enforceable right-to-return protections and independent monitoring for any RAD or Section 18 conversion of public housing units.
- Demand the public release of the DCHA Office of Accounting's final audit report when completed, including an accounting of any diverted funds.
- Fund an increase in housing specialist staffing to reduce caseloads to a level that allows for effective case management.
- Require DCHA to reduce the Administrative Plan lookback period for drug-related offenses to conform with HUD's 3-year recommendation and include clear guidance of how waitlist changes will be implemented and communicated.