



**Testimony of Amanda Korber
Staff Attorney
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia**

**Before the Committee on Human Services
Council of the District of Columbia:
Public Oversight Roundtable on the Department of Human Services' Rapid Re-Housing
Program**

December 14, 2017

I would like to thank Chairperson Nadeau and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Amanda Korber, and I am a housing staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia. I am going to discuss our serious concerns with the Rapid Rehousing Program. This testimony should sound familiar. Legal Aid raised nearly identical concerns at multiple hearings before this Committee. Yet, nothing has been done to address these problems.

Some of the problems with Rapid Rehousing can be addressed with common-sense changes to the law: capping each participant's rent at 30% of his or her income, as opposed to 60%, and holding providers accountable to recalculating rents in a timely manner. However, the most critical problem – that families simply cannot afford DC's exorbitant market rents after only a year or two of assistance – is a fundamental flaw in the program. Instead of investing more resources in Rapid Rehousing, we urge the Council to focus on funding long term housing subsidies for the District's most vulnerable families.

I think the distance between advocates and the administration on Rapid Rehousing actually boils down to something quite simple: There is a misperception that even if tenants cannot ultimately sustain their homes once they are terminated from the program, it is better that they spent the last year in an apartment that they will inevitably be displaced from than in shelter. However, this is simply not true in many cases. Moreover, permanent housing subsidies, which don't come with a heightened risk of eviction, and cost the city significantly less per year than a Rapid Rehousing voucher, can also be used to move families out of shelter.

Being evicted, or forcibly displaced – meaning having to move out of necessity rather than choice – is traumatizing for families, and gravely harms parents, children, and the community at large. Though this is common sense, it is not spoken about enough. Matthew Desmond explains in his recent book *Evicted*, that when a family is evicted they lose all of their possessions, children lose their schools, and parents lose the time and money they spent creating a home for their family. Eviction also takes a toll on mental health, and leads to higher rates of suicide and depression. These tenants are also stuck with a public eviction court record, which is commonly used by landlords to screen out prospective tenants. This means that in the future, evicted families will be stuck renting from the worst landlords. The families in Rapid Rehousing tend to be headed by young heads of household. To saddle them with a blemish on their rental history, which will prevent them from renting apartments in opportunity-rich neighborhoods in the future, is absurd. Finally, and perhaps the thing talked about least regarding eviction, is that

eviction destabilizes entire communities. When community members are cyclically being forced from their homes, there is little incentive to invest and contribute. Why spend time planting roots when you know you will be forced out in a year or two?

All of this is a complicated way of saying eviction causes real, tangible harm. And our clients know this. We hear regularly from tenants who wish they had never gone into the Rapid Rehousing Program. Or who are dumbfounded by the callousness of DHS ending their subsidy when they know it will cause them to end up right back where they started. We understand the urgent need to move people out of shelter, but we need to do so in a realistic way that does not traumatize families and leave them worse off.

Rapid Rehousing is an unsustainable solution to the District's affordable housing crisis. Legal Aid sees the fall out of terminated Rapid Rehousing subsidies regularly in landlord and tenant court. To be honest, when we see terminated rapid rehousing participants in eviction Court, there is little we can do for them. They cannot afford their rents, and their only option is to move or be evicted. We as a City as letting these families down and we need to better.

Legal Aid understands that no family should have to live for an extended period of time in shelter. However, Rapid Rehousing is an ill-fated solution to the District's growing affordable housing crisis. There is simply no fix to the program's time-limited nature.

As Matthew Desmond explained: "Eviction does not simply drop poor families into a dark valley, a trying yet relatively brief detour on life's journey. It fundamentally redirects their way, casting them onto a different, and much more difficult, path. Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty." (p. 299) D.C. should not be using its dollars to contribute to that cause. Instead of investing in short term housing solutions for its families, we urge the Council instead to increase funding for permanent affordable housing alternatives, such as Local Rent Supplement Program and Targeted Affordable Housing. Let's start moving people off the waiting lists for housing vouchers, so we have fewer people coming into shelter in the first place.