

**Testimony of Damon King  
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**Before the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Metropolitan Police Department**

**June 16, 2020**

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia<sup>1</sup> submits this testimony regarding the proposed Fiscal Year 2021 budget for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). At a time when people across the country – including District residents – have taken to the streets to demand justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and black people across the country who have been killed by police officers, it is crucial that we take a closer look at whether the decisions of our local leaders truly reflect the fundamental value that these protests seek to uphold: that black lives matter.

We are disappointed that the Mayor is proposing an \$18.5 million increase to the operating budget for the Metropolitan Police Department in FY21, even as programs that are vital to helping black and brown District residents who are struggling through a devastating pandemic and economic downturn remain underfunded. This is unacceptable. Legal Aid joins the chorus of voices from across the District calling for the elimination of this increase to MPD’s budget and, more broadly, investment in programs that directly assist struggling District residents with the range of challenges they face instead of in more law enforcement.

We at Legal Aid have long believed that creating safer, more stable communities means investing in programs that directly assist District residents who face economic and other challenges. These include investments in cash, food, and health assistance for those who are

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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.” Legal Aid is the oldest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. Over the last 88 years, tens of thousands of the District’s neediest residents have been served by Legal Aid staff and volunteers. 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 justice system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. More information about Legal Aid can be obtained from our website, [www.LegalAidDC.org](http://www.LegalAidDC.org), and our blog, [www.MakingJusticeReal.org](http://www.MakingJusticeReal.org).

struggling to feed, clothe, and care for themselves and their families;<sup>2</sup> in emergency rental assistance and permanent vouchers to respond to constantly rising housing costs and high rent burdens;<sup>3</sup> and in ensuring that all housing in the District is safe<sup>4</sup> and healthy.<sup>5</sup> While public safety is a complex, multifaceted issue, it is undoubtedly true that when people are secure in their ability to meet their needs and those of their families and loved ones, they are better positioned to build safe and secure communities for themselves and their neighbors.

The challenges that many District residents face have become even more daunting in the last few months, as COVID-19 has taken more than 500 lives<sup>6</sup> here in the District and led to many District residents losing their jobs and falling into a state of deep uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> And COVID-19 has continued to hit black and Latinx communities especially hard, with disproportionate numbers of black residents dying from the virus.<sup>8</sup> This is why last month, we urged the Mayor and the

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<sup>2</sup> Damon King, *Strengthening Our Safety Net: How the FY21 Budget Should Protect Struggling District Residents* May 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.makingjusticereal.org/strengthening-our-safety-net-how-the-fy21-budget-should-protect-struggling-district-residents>

<sup>3</sup> Damon King, *Preventing Pandemic-Driven Displacement: How the FY21 Budget Should Protect District Homeowners and Tenants*, May 6, 2020. Available at: <https://www.makingjusticereal.org/7996-2>

<sup>4</sup> Chelsea Cirruzzo, *Housing Advocates Want DCRA Overhauled After Deadly Kennedy St. Fire*, Washington City Paper, November 18, 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21098007/housing-advocates-want-dcra-overhauled-after-deadly-kennedy-st-fire>

<sup>5</sup> Morgan Baskin, *What Life Is Like—Still—In D.C.'s Public Housing*, Washington City Paper, August 16, 2018. Available at: <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21018152/for-public-housing-residents-in-dc-fighting-for-better-living-conditions-is-a-fulltime-job>

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., James Hohmann, *The Daily 202: D.C. surpasses 500 coronavirus deaths; nearly 3 in 4 have been African American*, The Washington Post, June 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2020/06/12/daily-202-d-c-surpasses-500-coronavirus-deaths-nearly-3-in-4-have-been-african-american/5ee32855602ff12947e8b314/>

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Kurzius, *When D.C.'s Ban On Evictions Ends, What Will Happen? It's Uncertain.*, WAMU, May 7, 2020. Available at: <https://wamu.org/story/20/05/07/when-d-c-s-ban-on-evictions-ends-what-will-happen-its-uncertain/>

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Julie Strupp, *More Than 500 D.C. Residents Have Died From COVID-19*, DCist, June 12, 2020. Available at: <https://dcist.com/story/20/06/12/more-than-500-d-c-residents-have-died-from-covid-19/>

Council to ensure that the FY21 budget protects marginalized communities and closes gaps that have left these communities so vulnerable in this difficult time.<sup>9</sup>

Since the Mayor's budget release, of course, we have been reminded of another reality that black and brown people in the District and across the country have had to contend with for far too long: the ever-present threat of police brutality and the undercurrent of racism that permeates every aspect of our society – including policing. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have again brought this reality into sharp relief, and those who have joined protests in recent days have sent a clear message: enough is enough.

It is in this environment – one in which black and brown communities have been ravaged by economic injustice, racism, and a historic pandemic – that the decisions made in the Mayor's proposed budget are truly unacceptable. The Mayor proposes an increase in our local police budget at the same time that other key investments are neglected or under-addressed. Consider just a few examples: the emergency rental assistance budget is flat compared to FY20,<sup>10</sup> there are no new investments in tenant-based Local Rent Supplement Program housing vouchers (in spite of a decades-long waiting list),<sup>11</sup> and investments in repairing unsafe conditions in public housing fall far short of what is needed.<sup>12</sup> The budget also neglects or reinforces public health program gaps<sup>13</sup> and does little to address problems at the District agency primarily responsible for ensuring safe housing.<sup>14</sup>

We at Legal Aid simply cannot accept that, at this historic moment, our policymakers would choose to increase the budget for MPD while leaving programs that are crucial to addressing the

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<sup>9</sup> Damon King, *A Recovery for All: Principles to Guide the District this Budget Season*, May 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.makingjusticereal.org/a-recovery-for-all-principles-to-guide-the-district-this-budget-season>

<sup>10</sup> See, Eunice Sung, *No significant funding added to Emergency Rental Assistance Program despite ongoing effects of COVID-19*, Street Sense Media, June 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.streetsensemedia.org/article/no-significant-funding-added-to-emergency-rental-assistance-program-despite-ongoing-effects-of-covid-19/#.Xue5BOcpDb1>

<sup>11</sup> See, Legal Aid Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony Regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority, May 28, 2020. Available at: <https://www.legalaiddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Legal-Aid-FY21-DCHA-Budget-Testimony-FINAL-1.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> See, Legal Aid Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony Regarding the Department of Health Care Finance, June 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.legalaiddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Legal-Aid-FY21-DHCF-Budget-Testimony-FINAL-1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> See, Legal Aid Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony Regarding the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, May 27, 2020. Available at: <https://www.legalaiddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FY21-DCRA-Budget-Testimony-Legal-Aid-5.27.20.pdf>

challenges that marginalized communities face with fewer resources than are needed. We urge the Council to re-balance the Mayor's proposed budget, reducing our spending on police and re-directing funds into community-based public safety solutions and programs that address the economic instability and uncertainty that District residents are facing. At the very least, the Council should eliminate the current proposed funding increase for MPD, but we urge that this should only be a first step: The Council should look closely at MPD's budget to identify where further funds may be better invested elsewhere, and continue to consider policy changes in policing and police oversight along the lines of emergency legislation that it passed last Tuesday.

We are in a moment when we must ask important questions – about what we need and expect from police, and more broadly, about how we ensure that people who are struggling truly have what they need to build lives and communities that are safe and secure. The answers to these questions, and the values we seek to uphold, must be reflected both in our budget and in the decisions our leaders make going forward.