

**Testimony of Amanda Korber
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**Before the Committee on Housing and Executive Administration
Council of the District of Columbia**

Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority

March 30, 2022

The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia¹ submits the following testimony to share two serious concerns regarding the Mayor’s proposed FY23 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 tenants off of DCHA’s decades-long waiting list. Second, while the Mayor has allocated \$50 million for public housing repairs and maintenance in FY22, and then some additional money on the out years, it is not enough to address the deplorable condition of the District’s public housing portfolio.

As a member of the Fair Budget Coalition, Legal Aid recommends that the Committee address each of these concerns by doing the following:

- 1) Allocate \$17.33 million in tenant-based LRSP vouchers to pull 800 District residents off of the voucher waiting list; and
- 2) Allocate an additional \$10 million for public housing maintenance and repairs, and make the total amount of funding (\$60 million) recurring.

We are glad DCHA is finally pulling families off the public housing waitlist (not to be confused with the voucher waiting list) by bringing some vacant units back online, but the speed at which DCHA is “getting through” the waitlist, and the abysmally low response rate from residents, is not a success. Rather, it demonstrates that so many residents died, were displaced from DC, or

¹ 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 90 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, and our blog, www.MakingJusticeReal.org.

were not able to update their contact information during the years and years that their names sat on that list with no movement. We cannot repeat those same mistakes again. That means we have to make big investments in deeply affordable housing and all of DCHA's housing programs now. There is no time to waste.

The District Should Invest in the Local Rent Supplement Program

The voucher waitlist has been closed for nearly nine years and there are still 37,160 residents languishing on it.² This means that since 2013, no new families can apply for DCHA's subsidized housing programs, and that families who are already on the voucher waiting list are waiting decades for affordable housing, even homeless families. When and if they can pull someone off the list, they are currently only up to people who joined the list in 2004.³ It also means that the need for affordable housing is far greater than even the 37,160 number suggests. Legal Aid has worked with families and individuals who were never able to get on the waiting list, either because they were minors the last time it was open or because they simply did not know it opened up for a short time in 2013. And, given the last two years, it is a near certainty that many new families need affordable housing after being devastated by the pandemic, whether because they lost jobs, depleted their savings, or lost family members who used to contribute to the rent. Even though they aren't on the list, they desperately need affordable housing. For them, it is not a matter of waiting decades. 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 of this waiting list.

In comparison to this crisis, Legal Aid and the Fair Budget Coalition's ask is modest: \$17.33 million for tenant-based LRSP vouchers, which would allow DCHA to give vouchers to and stably house 800 additional families. Obviously much more is needed, but this would be a first step.

The Council Should Commit to Substantial and Sustained Investments in Public Housing Repairs

We are thankful that the Mayor included \$50 million for public housing repairs in the FY23 budget, \$41.1 million in FY24, and \$19.3 million in FY25, but it simply is not enough. Public housing has been underfunded at both the federal and local level for decades. That means that public housing residents have lived in deplorable conditions across the District for years. It also means the District needs to make sustained and substantial investments in public housing going forward if it wants a chance at catching up and ensuring that families live in safe, clean and habitable housing. As a member of the Fair Budget Coalition, we ask that the Council commit to funding public housing repairs at \$60 million per year, for a minimum of 10 years. Regular and recurring funding levels are critical so the housing authority can plan adequately major renovations, developments, and projects.

² DCHA FY22 Performance Oversight Responses, available at <https://dccouncil.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/DCHAATT.pdf>, p. 330.

³ *Id.*

We understand that this is a significant commitment, but the severity of the condition of the District's public housing stock demands it. It also demands that the Council do a better job of overseeing this money and DCHA's plans for spending it. It is incumbent on this Council to ensure that not one dollar of local money goes to displace public housing residents. This can be accomplished by rigorous oversight accompanied by legislation that requires DCHA to report regularly and in detail how this money is being spent, ensures that DCHA replaces every public housing unit it demolishes, and guarantees its residents a robust and 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 FY23 budget. We urge you to prioritize the District's lowest and no-income residents and ensure that everyone has a safe and affordable home.