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Public Oversight Roundtable on Short-Term Family Housing Construction Progress

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Thank you Chairperson Nadeau and Chairperson Cheh and members of the Committees for allowing me to testify at this Roundtable on Short-Term Family Housing Construction Progress. My name is Kathy Zeisel. I am a Senior Supervising Attorney at Children's Law Center¹ and a resident of the District. With more than 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

We previously offered testimony on the topic of DC General closing as part of our DHS Oversight testimony and again for the hearing on the closing of DC General, but we are here today because we are dismayed and disappointed to hear about the significant delays in the construction of the new short-term housing, and we are concerned about the reports that the agencies in charge of the construction knew about the delays and did not accurately represent this to the public or the families who live there.²

DHS and the Mayor for years have stated that they would not close DC General without replacement shelters for its families to move in to.³ However, the approximately 196 families at DC General are living through demolition going on around them, which is leaving behind dust, and likely asbestos and lead, all of which could exacerbate or cause serious health conditions in the children living there.^{4,5} If we

delay the demolition of DC General and keep families there, they will continue to face these health harming conditions.

In our prior testimony, we also raised concerns that the closure of the shelter would cause significant turmoil for school-age children. While DHS hopes that there will be few families left at DC General in September, their own statistics regarding families' average time in shelter make it unclear that this will occur.⁶ Yet, when we raised these concerns, we were assured that this would not be an issue and that there was a plan for the residents, including moving many of them to the new short-term housing.⁷ We are now in a position where we have left these families with even more uncertainty in their lives after the reports about the construction delays surfaced.

As we feared when we last testified on this issue, it also now appears that many families may have to move twice. Closing DC General in September will likely require many families to be first to transferred to hotels and motels where children are not even allowed to play outside their rooms.⁸ And then, they will transfer then again to the short-term housing. Uprooting families even once is traumatic, but doing so multiple times will take a tremendous toll on the children living in those shelters.

Because many of the hotels, motels, and short-term housing are far away from DC General, children affected by this turmoil may have to transfer schools three times in less than two school years. Given that the final closure will certainly occur after the start of the school year, we again urge DHS to inform families of their proposed transfer

location immediately as we are already getting close to the start of the new school year. We again ask for DHS to coordinate with DCPS and public charter schools to plan for these children before the start of the school year. We hope that the Council and DHS will provide funding for transportation for the parent and child above and beyond what McKinney Vento offers to get to their school of origin so that children will not have to move shelter and change schools several times during the school year or ride public transportation for hours each day back to their current schools. We are specifically asking that the Council fund school bus or van transportation for these children to help minimize the impact of these school transitions on their education.

In addition, DC General has numerous supportive services onsite, including case management, the Homeless Children's Playtime Project, literacy services and meal services, and we are concerned that if families are scattered to numerous locations, they will lose these supports. As before, we encourage DHS to work to transition these services to the new locations.

We are also concerned about the impact of trying to escalate a construction schedule will have on the existing residents in Wards 7 and 8. The most recent Washington City Paper article reports that the new plan is to extend construction to one in the morning.⁹ It is not clear whether this plan would be sufficient to even finish construction by the end of September, but, even if were, such a plan would be disruptive to the families that already live in the neighborhood, and certainly does

nothing to engender goodwill among future neighbors. We ask the Council to encourage community feedback on this particular issue.

We are disappointed by the, at best, misleading information provided to the Council and to the public about the progress of construction on the shelters. We are also concerned that the years of careful planning to close DC General are being undermined by the rush to close it next fall before the new short-term housing is ready. I hope my testimony will encourage more oversight over not just the misrepresentations about the construction delays, but also about whether there is thoughtful planning and consideration regarding the impact that DC General's closure, and logistics of that closure, will have on the health, education, and general well-being of the children and families who reside there.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

¹ Children's Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to advocate for children who are abused or neglected, who aren't learning in school, or who have health problems that can't be solved by medicine alone. With more than 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

² See "Documents Show Construction Debacle Jeopardizes Homeless Shelter Replacement Plan", Washington City Paper, June 15, 2018, at <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21009575/construction-debacle-jeopardizes-homeless-shelter-replacement-plan> ; See also "Officials Will Investigate Reported Delays in the Ward 7 and 8 Homeless Shelters", Washington City Paper June 21, 2018, *available at*: <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21010358/officials-will-investigate-reported-delays-in-the-ward-7-and-8-replacement-homeless-shelters-for-dc-general>.

³ See Muriel Bowser, Mayor Government of the District of Columbia, *Q&A Ending Homelessness in the District* (“Q: When will the city close DC General? A: The short-term family housing facilities must be in place and open before we can close DC General. All of the buildings secured by the District will need to be renovated or built from the ground up. The new sites will be open and able to accommodate families in 2017 and 2018. Once the final one is in place, the District will close the DC General Family Shelter”) available at <https://dmhhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/publication/attachments/Ending-Homelessness-Q-and-A.pdf>; Executive Office of the Mayor, press release: *Mayor Bowser Details Plan to Close DC General* at <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-details-plan-close-dc-general>; Laura Zeilinger, *Testimony for Public Hearing: Bill 21-620, Homeward DC Omnibus Approval Facilities Plan for Short-Term Housing for Persons Experiencing Homelessness Act of 2016*, (“And the longer we are in a place like DC General, the longer vulnerable families in DC aren’t provided with a fair shot at success or dignity. Our threshold for allowing that to continue should be only as long as it takes to develop and open these new sites...But we cannot close DC General without sites to replace its 270 units. We cannot create the types of programs we all agree are the right programs to have, without specific sites to build them on. This bill and closing DC General go hand in hand.”), p. 255 available at [http://dccouncil.us/files/user_uploads/event_testimony/B21-620_Homeless_Shelter_Plan_hearing_SCANNED_HEARING_TESTIMONY_optimized_\(2\).pdf](http://dccouncil.us/files/user_uploads/event_testimony/B21-620_Homeless_Shelter_Plan_hearing_SCANNED_HEARING_TESTIMONY_optimized_(2).pdf);

⁴ See “DC readies shift to smaller homeless shelters amid DC General’s closing”, WTOP, June 7, 2018, <https://wtop.com/dc/2018/06/dc-readies-shift-to-smaller-homeless-shelters-amid-dc-generals-closing/> ‘Where do I go now?’ In D.C., fear as a decrepit homeless shelter is finally closing, Washington Post, May 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/where-do-i-go-now-in-dc-fear-as-a-decrepit-homeless-shelter-is-finally-closing/2018/05/10/1375e686-546c-11e8-abd8-265bd07a9859_story.html?utm_term=.ad830b225cb0

⁵ Estimates of pediatric asthma prevalence in DC range from 18% to 31%, all of which are significantly higher than the national average prevalence of pediatric asthma, which is 9%. For local prevalence of pediatric asthma, see Children’s Law Center Housing Conditions Training, 2017, available at <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/file/7814/download?token=W0mDuG2T>; DC Health Matters at <http://www.dchealthmatters.org/index.php?module=indicators&controller=index&action=view&indicatorId=1787&localeId=130951>. For national asthma prevalence data in children, see <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/asthma/index.html>. There is also a twenty-fold disparity in the number of ER visits for asthma between the highest and lowest zip codes in DC. See IMPACT DC Annual Report 2017, available at <https://childrensnational.org/-/media/cnhs-site/files/departments/impactdc/impact-dc-annual-report.ashx>.

⁶ DHS states that for families that exited in FY17, the median stay was 167 days, but for families who did not exit in FY17, the median DC General stay was 430 days. DHS 2018 Oversight Written Answers at 86.

⁷ “Homeless Advocates Question Bowser’s Plan to Close D.C. General Shelter This Year, WAMU, March 14, 2018, available at <https://wamu.org/story/18/03/14/homeless-advocates-question-bowsers-plan-close-d-c-general-shelter-year/>

⁸ Per notices at the Days Inn, families can be terminated from shelter for allowing their children to play outside the hotel rooms. See Tweet by Morgin Baskin, Washington City Paper, June 18, 2018 available at: <https://mobile.twitter.com/mhaskin/status/1008798133416022016?s=12>.

⁹ See “Officials Will Investigate Reported Delays in the Ward 7 and 8 Homeless Shelters”, June 21, 2018, Washington City Paper available at: <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/housing-complex/article/21010358/officials-will-investigate-reported-delays-in-the-ward-7-and-8-replacement-homeless-shelters-for-dc-general>