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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Housing
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Budget Oversight Hearing:
District of Columbia Housing Authority

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson White, and members of the Committee. My name is Makenna Osborn. I am a Policy Attorney at Children’s Law Center and a resident of the District. Children’s Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children’s urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Mayor’s proposed FY24 budget for the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA). Each year, Children’s Law Center works with hundreds of families whose pediatric medical provider has identified a non-medical barrier to a child’s health and well-being. All too often these are housing conditions cases where a family’s landlord has failed to ensure their home is safe from mold problems, pest infestations and water intrusion – as required by DC law¹ – exacerbating a child’s asthma and putting them at risk of lead exposure. For many of the families we work with, that landlord is DCHA. The horrendous conditions our clients in

public housing live with reflect the importance of ensuring that DCHA has sufficient funding to renovate its old and deteriorating properties and carry out regular meaningful repairs and maintenance in units across its portfolio.

Funding for Repairs and Maintenance in Public Housing

Children’s Law Center appreciates that the Mayor’s proposed budget allocates \$115 million in capital funds to DCHA for the repair and rehabilitation of public housing units over the next two years, with \$54 million in FY24 and \$61 million in FY25.² This represents a modest but necessary increase in the \$50 million allocated to DCHA annually over the past three years.³ In 2019 DCHA calculated that it would cost over \$2 billion to complete all required repairs across its public housing portfolio.⁴ We have no reason to believe that number is inflated, but even if it were, clearly DCHA requires much more than the \$150 million provided over the past three years to carry out remaining repairs and renovations needed to ensure that residents in DCHA properties have safe and healthy homes. Chairperson White’s bold vision to give DCHA \$100 million per year over the next five years for public housing maintenance and repairs is in line with the costs identified by DCHA in 2019.⁵ Therefore, we hope the Committee will increase the amount of funding dedicated to public housing repairs in FY24 to *at least* \$60 million as recommended by the Fair Budget Coalition, of which we are a proud member.⁶

We also implore the Committee to engage in robust oversight of *how* DCHA spends this funding to ensure that all repairs are aimed at the root of problems, and conducted in a timely, workmanlike manner that prioritizes the health and safety of residents. In 2019, DCHA spent millions in response to a portfolio-wide assessment of lead-based paint in its properties but failed to “quickly [or] competently” remediate identified hazards, “[leaving] its residents exposed to lead-based paint hazards for an unacceptably long time, prolonging their risk of lead poisoning.”⁷ We know from clients living in Park Morton, one of the properties where DCHA carried out these lead remediations, that because the agency did not address underlying water intrusion, the lead-based paint in residents’ units deteriorated again shortly after DCHA’s work, reintroducing the lead hazard.⁸ We hope the Committee will ask DCHA how it plans to learn from rather than repeat past mistakes as the agency implements its current portfolio-wide inspection and repair initiative and new preventative maintenance plan.⁹

Funding for New Permanent Housing Vouchers and Improved Voucher Utilization

Children’s Law Center also works with families who receive locally funded permanent housing vouchers through DCHA. We believe these vouchers, especially Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH) vouchers, are essential resources for ensuring that low-income families can afford to live in DC’s costly housing market and an effective tool for helping families achieve long-term housing stability – especially younger heads of

household who have been unable to access DCHA's voucher waitlist since it closed in 2013.¹⁰ DCHA and the Department of Human Services (DHS) share responsibility for TAH vouchers. DHS allocates the vouchers to eligible families and provides the "light touch" services for TAH participants and DCHA helps families utilize their vouchers. Therefore, funding for the TAH vouchers is included in the DCHA budget.

Chairperson White and the Council have led historic investments in locally funded housing vouchers in recent budgets and we hope you will continue supporting permanent housing solutions in FY24.¹¹ Along with our partners in the Fair Budget Coalition, Children's Law Center believes that the District needs to fund 1,920 TAH vouchers for families to meet the anticipated needs of families in shelter and exiting Rapid Re-Housing in FY24.¹² With thousands of families in Rapid Re-Housing facing program termination beginning as early as August 2023, additional vouchers will be an absolute necessity in FY24 to keep families from experiencing homelessness.¹³ Unfortunately, the Mayor's proposed budget does not fund any new vouchers. We share the concern raised by the Mayor that of the 366 new TAH family vouchers added in FY21 and FY22, 69.7% remain unutilized.¹⁴ However, we do not believe this is due to a lack of need, but bureaucratic barriers to accessing the vouchers. Funding targeted to where in the voucher process utilization is being stalled could significantly increase utilization in FY24. We hope this Committee will continue to probe both DHS and DCHA about the

voucher allocation and utilization process, identify what resources are needed to cut through voucher backlogs – including additional DCHA staff to process the increased number of local voucher applications—and pair those resources with enough vouchers to meet the needs anticipated in FY24.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

¹ See D.C. Code § 8-241.01 *et seq.* (DC mold law), D.C. Mun. Regs. tit 14. § 801 (1900) *et seq.* (DC Housing Code provisions on pest infestations), D.C. Code § 8-231.02(a) (DC lead law).

² Office of the Mayor, District of Columbia, *FY2024 Budget Plan: Presentation to Council 15* (2023), available at:

https://mayor.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayoromb/page_content/attachments/FY2024%20BUDGET%20PLAN_Presentation%20to%20Council_a.pdf; D.C. Housing Auth., (*HY0*) *Housing Authority Subsidy* (2024), available at:

https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/hy_dcha_capital_2024m.pdf
³ *Id.*

⁴ DCHA, *Our, People, Our Portfolio, Our Plan: DCHA 20-Year Transformation Plan*, p. 14, 19 (August 28, 2019), available at:

https://dcha.us/img/guest_uploads/temp_rimehhGVtC15670083132z6ZwtkqRDhoZKdydLeU.pdf; See also Andrew Giambrone, *D.C.'s Public Housing Will Be Overhauled Under New 20-Year Plan*, *Curbed* (September 4, 2019), available at: <https://dc.curbed.com/2019/9/4/20849254/dc-public-housing-redevelopment-plan-affordable-dcha>.

⁵ Councilmember Robert White (@CMRobertWhiteDC), Twitter (January 10, 2023, 11:01 AM), available at: <https://twitter.com/CMRobertWhiteDC/status/1612842198248177666?cxt=HHwWhIC-leTb--EsAAAA>;

John Henry, *DC Councilmember Wants District to Invest Additional \$500 Million in Public Housing Maintenance*, *WUSA9* (January 10, 2023), available at:

<https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/local/dc/district-council.member-wants-district-to-invest-additional-500-million-in-public-housing-maintenance/65-0d9a3fcd-cab8-44b4-8a52-759c540cec41>.

⁶ https://fairbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/REV02232023_Digital_Complete-2024-Budget-Platform_pages.pdf.

⁷ Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (ODCA), *More Urgency Needed to Fix Lead-Based Paint Hazards*, p. 7 (November 18, 2020), available at: <https://dcauditor.wpenenginepowered.com/wp->

[content/uploads/2020/11/Lead.Based_Paint_Final_Report.11.18.20-1.pdf](#). See also Morgan Baskin, *D.C. Housing Authority Failed to Fix Lead Paint Issues in Public Housing on Time, Audit Says*, DCist (November 18, 2020), available at: <https://dcist.com/story/20/11/18/public-housing-authority-lead-paint-issues-auditor/>.

⁸ Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, *More Urgency Needed to Fix Lead-Based Paint Hazards* (Nov. 18, 2020), available at: https://dcauditor.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Lead.Based_Paint_Final_Report.11.18.20-1.pdf; Morgan Baskin, *D.C. Housing Authority Failed to Fix Lead Paint Issues in Public Housing on Time, Audit Says*, DCist (November 18, 2020), available at: <https://dcist.com/story/20/11/18/public-housing-authority-lead-paint-issues-auditor/>.

⁹ DCHA, FY2022 Performance Oversight Pre-Hearing Responses, responses to Q6 and Q8.

¹⁰ B25-0047, *Rapid Re-Housing Reform Amendment Act of 2023*, Sec. 2, Sec. 32(d), lines 54-57; *Id.* Sec. 3, Sec. 33(d), lines 114-115; *Id.* Sec. 2, Sec. 32(c), lines 84-88; Brittany K. Ruffin, *Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless*, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing, (February 23, 2023) available at: <https://www.legalclinic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DHS-Oversight-Testimony-2023-letterhead-1.pdf>. Regarding the DCHA waitlist, see Annemarie Cuccia, *With 40,000 People On The D.C. Housing Authority's Waitlist, D.C. Funds Only 20 New Vouchers For That List*, DCist, (June 4, 2022), available at: <https://dcist.com/story/22/06/24/dc-housing-authority-waitlist-voucher-funding/>.

¹¹ *Historic Housing Investments Present Opportunity to Make Real Progress in Ending Homelessness*, Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (August 13, 2021), available at: <https://www.legalclinic.org/historic-housing-investments-present-opportunity-to-make-real-progress-in-ending-homelessness/>; Annemarie Cuccia, *Council's Initial Budget Vote Adds 400 Housing Vouchers, Expands EITC Program*, The DC Line (Published: May 20, 2022; Last updated: June 2, 2022), available at: <https://thedcline.org/2022/05/20/councils-initial-budget-vote-adds-400-housing-vouchers-expands-eitc-program/>.

¹² Fair Budget Coalition, *FY2024 Meeting the Needs: Equitable Budget Policy*, p. 23, available at:

https://fairbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/REV02232023_Digital_Complete-2024-Budget-Platform_pages.pdf.

¹³ In communications with members of the FRSP Advisory Group in February 2023, Noah Abraham (Deputy Administrator of DHS' FSA – Families Division) indicated that DHS anticipates exiting the first group of families currently in Rapid Re-Housing from the program by the end of August 2023.

¹⁴ For PSH-F, there were a total of 491 new vouchers in FY21 and FY22. 294 of those remain unused. For TAH-F, there were a total of 366 new vouchers in FY21 and FY22. 255 of those remain unused. DHS FY22 & FY23 Pre-Hearing Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q76, available at: [Dept. of Human Services Prehearing Responses 2-20-23 \(003\) \(2\).pdf](#)