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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Health
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Public Hearing:
Behavioral Health Housing Voucher Transparency Amendment Act of 2025 (B26-0091)

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Good morning, Chairperson Henderson, and members of the Committee. My name is Makenna Osborn. I am a Senior 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 today regarding the Behavioral Health Housing Voucher Transparency Amendment Act of 2025 (Act).[1] Each year Children's Law Center works with hundreds of families who are trying to provide their children with a stable place to call home.[2] We see firsthand the profound impact housing insecurity can have on a child's health, development, and ability to learn.[3] Evidence shows that deep, ongoing rental subsidies, like those provided through the Department of Behavioral Health's (DBH) Home First Housing Voucher Program[4] are a particularly effective tool for helping families access and maintain housing security.[5] Through our experience working with families who receive similar District-funded vouchers administered by the Department of Human Services (DHS),[6] Children's Law Center also regularly observes how a lack of transparency and inadequate communication can cause significant administrative delays that force eligible District families to remain in insecure and unsafe housing for lengthy periods of time, undermining the efficacy of local vouchers.[7]

Therefore, Children's Law Center supports the passage of this Act to "improve efficiency, reduce delays, and prevent document loss," in the DBH housing voucher administration process.[8] In my testimony today, I would like to offer the Committee insights on how DHS and the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA) have been working to address similar problems in other local voucher programs. I hope this information will help the Committee to identify areas where its efforts to make DBH's voucher administration more transparent and user-friendly can learn from or align with existing initiatives at DHS and DCHA.

First, Children's Law Center strongly supports the requirement that DBH develop and publish on its website a standardized checklist for its housing vouchers.[9] In 2024, DHS and DCHA launched a new, streamlined application for their voucher programs.[10] The new application packet includes clear instructions, a checklist of the steps that need to be completed, and a comprehensive list of materials that satisfy documentation requirements.[11] All of the materials are published on DCHA's website.[12] While the new application has not resolved all the delays in the processing of local voucher applications, Children's Law Center has observed that it is now less confusing and onerous to successfully submit a complete application. Additionally, the standardized checklist and documentation requirements appear to be reducing the lengthy back and forth that occurs when an application is incomplete or out of date.[13] DCHA recently reported that for the first time in years, it is currently meeting its goal of issuing eligibility determinations on voucher applications in less than 30 days on average.[14] We encourage the Committee to consider whether the application materials developed for DHS's local voucher programs could be used for DBH vouchers as well. At a minimum, DBH should review the new DCHA and DHS

voucher application to help guide its development of the standardized checklist required by the Act.

Second, while Children's Law Center supports the inclusion of a requirement for DBH to "establish and maintain a secure online portal for applicants, caseworks, and property managers to track in real time the status of a housing voucher application," we encourage the Committee to coordinate with the Committees on Housing and Human Services to determine whether DBH could utilize the same portal as other local voucher programs to satisfy that requirement to avoid unnecessary duplication. Through our work with families who are applying for or seeking to utilize a local voucher, we recognize the value of residents and case managers being able to proactively track their voucher application status and receive automated communications when there is an issue or update and we have advocated for DHS and DCHA to implement a resident-facing portal similar to the one envisioned by the Act for their vouchers.[15] Therefore, we were excited to learn that DCHA recently implemented such a portal, Rent Café, for its public housing and federal voucher programs. It is Children's Law Center's understanding that the Rent Café portal:

- allows voucher applicants to easily upload eligibility documentation themselves; [16]
- can automatically check whether a voucher application is complete;[17]
- empowers voucher applicants to "see where they are in the application [eligibility determination] process at any time, reducing stress and uncertainty;"[18] and
- helps public housing authority staff to "keep[] [voucher applicants] informed via [automatic] email, cutting down on follow-up calls and letters."[19]

DCHA and DHS are currently working to implement Rent Café for local housing voucher programs as well.[20] While questions remain about whether Rent Café can be sufficiently customized to reflect the different eligibility standards for local vouchers, if Rent Café is successfully expanded to DHS's local vouchers, it could be an efficient use of District resources for DBH to utilize it as a portal to track its vouchers as well. If Rent Cafe is not expanded to DHS's local vouchers, DHS will likely be looking for an alternate portal tool, and it would be advisable for DHS and DBH to do so jointly. DCHA, DHS and the Committees on Housing and Human Services are actively focused on improving transparency and reducing delays in other local voucher programs and could be a helpful resource for this Committee as you move forward with the Act.[21]

Lastly, Children's Law Center supports the Act's requirement for DBH to establish a system for tracking key voucher administration metrics and regularly publishing that data to support ongoing evaluation. For the past several years DHS has operated a public-facing dashboard tracking utilization of its locally funded vouchers.[22] Children's Law Center has found it to be a useful resource for identifying the biggest points of delay within the voucher administration process and targeting oversight and recommendations for improvement accordingly. Moving forward, we encourage the Committee and DBH to review the DHS website as an example of voucher administration tracking and evaluation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions the Committee has today. Moving forward, I am happy to be a resource to help the Committee and DBH learn from and connect to other local housing voucher programs.

[1] Behavioral Health Housing Voucher Transparency Amendment Act of 2025 (B26-0091), *available at*: https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0091.

[2] Children's Law Center's innovative medical legal partnership, Healthy Together, places attorneys at primary care pediatric clinics throughout the city with Children's National, Unity Health Care, and Mary's Center to receive referrals from pediatric providers for assistance with non-medical barriers to a child's health and well-being. See Children's Law Center, *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/ourimpact/health/.

[3] *See* Sonya Acosta, "Stable Housing is Foundational to Children's Well-Being," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Feb. 15 2022), *available at*: https://www.cbpp.org/blog/stable-housing-is-foundational-to-childrens-well-being; Megan Sandel et al., "Housing as a Healthcare Investment," Children's Health Watch (Mar. 2016), *available at*: https://childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/Housing-as-a-Health-Care-Investment.pdf.

[4] *See* Department of Behavioral Health, *Fiscal Year 2024 Performance Oversight Pre-Hearing Questions*, response to Question 28, *available at*: https://dccouncil.gov/health-14/.

[5] Solari, Claudia D., et. al., *Housing Insecurity in the District of Columbia,* Urban Institute, November 2023, p. 28, *available at*: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Housing%20Insecurity%20in%20the%20District%20of%20Columbia_0.pdf. *See* Solari, Claudia D., Douglas Walton, and Jill Khadduri. 2021. "How Well Do Housing Vouchers Work for Black Families Experiencing Homelessness? Evidence from the Family Options Study." The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 693(1): 193-208; Gubits, Daniel, Marybeth Shinn, Michelle Wood, Stephen Bill, Samuel Dastrup, Claudia D. Solari, Scott R. Brown, Debi McInnis, Tom McCall, and Utsav Kattel. 2015. Family Options Study: 3-Year Impacts of Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families. Washington DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development; Fischer, Will. October 2015. "Research Shows Housing Vouchers Reduce Hardship and Provide Platform for Long-Term Gains Among Children." Washington DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; and Wood, Michelle, Jennifer Turnham, and Gregory Mills. 2008. "Housing Affordability and Family Wellbeing: Results from the Housing Voucher Evaluation." Housing Policy Debate 19 (2): 367–412.

[6] The Department of Human Services (DHS) operates two locally funded long-term housing voucher programs for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH). To learn more about these local vouchers, *see A Path to Ending Chronic Homelessness in DC*, Department of Human Services, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/993e532a43bd4af3a2bf1b69d54dc704 (accessed December 9, 2025). For a discussion of Children's Law Center's experiences with DHS-administered vouchers, *see* Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Committees on Housing and Human Services (November 13, 2025), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-roundtable-on-fixing-the-districts-voucher-bottleneck/.

[7] Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Housing (February 29, 2024), p. 6-8, *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2023-24-oversight-testimony-department-of-human-services/.

[8] Behavioral Health Housing Voucher Transparency Amendment Act of 2025 (B26-0091), Introduction Letter, *available at*: https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0091.

[9] Behavioral Health Housing Voucher Transparency Amendment Act of 2025 (B26-0091), lines 42-55, *available at*: https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0091.

[10] The new and streamlined application was developed in partnership with the Lab @ DC and informed by input from voucher holders, case managers contracted by DHS, and agency staff Cite to LAB at DC

report. *How Can We Make it Easier to Apply for a Housing Voucher?*, The Lab @ DC, https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/housing-voucher-application (accessed December 9, 2025).

[11] The new application and all associated materials are available on DCHA's website. *See Resources: Housing Voucher Application Forms*, District of Columbia Housing Authority, https://www.dchousing.org/wordpress/resources/housing-voucher-application-forms/ (accessed December 9, 2025). For a summary of the changes made to streamline and make the new application more user-friendly, *see How Can We Make it Easier to Apply for a Housing Voucher?*, The Lab @ DC, https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/housing-voucher-application (accessed December 9, 2025). The "Local Housing Voucher Supplement" includes a step-by-step checklist listing all the steps required to complete the application and a "Documents You Need to Show Us to Verify Your Information" lists all application elements that require supporting documentation and what can be submitted to meet that requirement. Local Housing Voucher Supplement, p. 1, 5, *available at*: https://www.dchousing.org/wordpress/resources/housing-voucher-application-forms/ (accessed December 9, 2025).

[12] *Resources: Housing Voucher Application Forms*, District of Columbia Housing Authority, https://www.dchousing.org/wordpress/resources/housing-voucher-application-forms/ (accessed December 9, 2025).

[13] One of the original findings of the Lab @ DC was that the lengthy, redundant, and disparate application components and lack of agreed upon uniform requirements/standards between DCHA and DHS, lead to frequent mistakes in applications when first submitted. As a result, back and forth communications about fixing errors lengthened application processing time. It also caused DHS to institute a time-consuming process of four internal reviews before submitting an application to DCHA in an attempt to catch errors. Opportunities to Improve DC's Housing Voucher Programs, The Lab @ DC, DC DHS, and DCHA (February 2024), p. 24, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d2361aa11fed60001f7ab3a/t/65ca3009a915f84dae6567eb/1707749413982/Final+Report+-+Opportunities+to+Improve+DC%27s+Housing+Voucher_Feb2024.pdf.

[14] In remarks to the Committees on Housing and Human Services on November 13, 2025, DCHA's Deputy Executive Director Nicole Wickliffe stated that the average number of days it takes DCHA staff to review a voucher application and issue an eligibility determination is 23 days. Joint Public Oversight Roundtable, Housing Without the Holdup: Fixing the District's Voucher Bottleneck, District of Columbia Committee on Housing and Committee on Human Services (November 13, 2025), at 4:12:55, *available at*: https://dc.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=56.

[15] *See* Makenna Osborn, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Committees on Housing and Human Services (November 13, 2025), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-roundtable-on-fixing-the-districts-voucher-bottleneck/.

[16] PHA: Products: Rent Café PHA, Yardi.com, https://www.yardi.com/product/rentcafe-pha/ (accessed November 12, 2025) ("Make it easy for applicants to submit eligibility documentation without filling out a stack of paperwork.").

[17] *Id.* ("Rent Café PHA automatically checks for completion, reducing the need for staff to follow up.").

[18] *How to Simplify Operations from Start to Finish with RentCafe PHA*, Yardi, p. 6, how-to-simplify-operations-from-start-to-finish-with-rentcafe-pha.pdf.

[19] *Id.*

[20] In remarks to the Committees on Housing and Human Services on November 13, 2025, DCHA and DHS leadership reported that they have been in communications with each other and Rent Café's operator, Yardi, to customize the Rent Café portal for use with DC's locally funded vouchers. *See* Joint Public Oversight Roundtable, Housing Without the Holdup: Fixing the District's Voucher Bottleneck,

District of Columbia Committee on Housing and Committee on Human Services (November 13, 2025), beginning at 4:15:19, *available at*: https://dc.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=56.

[21] See District of Columbia Committees on Housing and Human Services, Joint Public Oversight Roundtable, Housing Without the Holdup: Fixing the District's Voucher Bottleneck, https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/1965 (held on November 13, 2025). On November 13, 2025, Councilmember Robert White, Chair of the Committee on Housing, issued a press release that the Committee on Housing "will introduce a bill to improve voucher processes in the coming months" and stated that his Committee and the Committee on Human Services will be continuing to work closely with the agencies and stakeholders "to ensure the District's voucher programs operate efficiently, transparently, and with the urgency that residents deserve." Office of Councilmember Robert C. White, Jr., Committee on Housing to Introduce Bill to Help Minimize District's Housing Voucher Processing Timeline (November 13, 2025), email of press release on file with Children's Law Center.

[22] *A Path to Ending Chronic Homelessness in DC*, Department of Human Services, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/993e532a43bd4af3a2bf1b69d54dc704 (accessed December 9, 2025).