



October 28, 2013

Addressing Safety of Unaccompanied Children in the Winter Plan

An open letter to the community from David A. Berns, Director of the DC Department of Human Services

Mayor Vincent C. Gray and the City Council of the District of Columbia have provided an additional \$500,000 for the fiscal year 2014 that will be used to expand the availability of crisis beds for unaccompanied children (under age 18) who do not have a safe place to stay. This funding will provide an additional 6 bed facility providing shelter and services for up to three days without parental or court approval and for up to two weeks with parental or court approval. With a projected average stay of approximately one week, this new facility will provide emergency shelter for over 300 additional unaccompanied children. It is expected that this additional resource will fill the need in the District.

The District of Columbia's Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) prepares an annual Winter Plan to meet the needs of homeless individuals and families when the temperature, including wind chill, drops below 32 degrees. This year, the ICH is attempting to craft the appropriate response and services for unaccompanied minors (under age 18). Although the District has a long history of providing for the safety of children, the issues of unaccompanied children have never been expressly included in the Winter Plan for Homelessness. Some advocates believe that the District's Right to Shelter legislation extends to unaccompanied children who have run away from home for issues other than abuse or neglect.

While safety is the primary concern for all children, the response and best way to provide for that safety is very complex. Many agencies are involved and a multitude of laws and systems interact. For these reasons, it has not been an easy chore to describe how the needs of unaccompanied children will be addressed in the Winter Plan. To help facilitate this discussion, the Department of Human Services (DHS) drafted a framework that describes a variety of reasons that may have resulted in children not being with their families; the primary individuals or agencies that are responsible for providing for the children's safety; and the ways children and the community can navigate the complex system to assure safety.

The proposed language in the Winter Plan clarifies that the District's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is the agency with statutory authority to provide intervention for unaccompanied children who cannot or should not return home due to issues of child abuse or neglect. For other children who have run away from home for reasons other than abuse or neglect, the framework recognizes that the primary responsibility for the safety and care of children remains with their families. But often these families need additional support and services to address conflicts and parenting issues.

The City has several community-based non-profits that provide services to run away and homeless youth and their families. These providers have federal authorization to place children into group homes for up to three days without court or parental permission. The local agencies provide these placements and other services year round using federal, private and sometimes local funding. Providers have the discretion not to place children such as when children can return to their families.

The District needs to carefully consider the implications before changing these long standing practices or reducing the flexibility to make placements or other arrangements based on the specific needs of children and their families. The proposed language for the Winter Plan is predicated on the belief that minor children should be considered as part of a family group unless CFSA has determined that the child should not or cannot be with their family. Those children who can and should be with their families should be served in the context of their families.

The ICH is continuing to find the appropriate language and response to include in the Winter Plan. Although full agreement on the language may never be reached, the ICH, the Mayor and his full administration remains committed and confident that the safety of children will guide the final decisions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David A. Berns". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

David Berns, Director

DC Department of Human Services