

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Department of Human Services**



**Fiscal Year 2018 - 2019 Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
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Director

Before the  
Committee on Human Services  
Council of the District of Columbia  
The Honorable Brianne K. Nadeau, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building  
Room 412  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Friday, March 1, 2019  
10:00 A.M.

Good afternoon, Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Laura Zeilinger, and I am the Director of the Department of Human Services (DHS). Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser in today's hearing to discuss the activities and accomplishments of the Department in Fiscal Year 2018 and Fiscal Year 2019 to date.

Mayor Bowser's Fiscal Year 2018 budget made investments that supported our efforts to deliver on the promise of our shared DC values. These efforts include creating economic opportunity, making our neighborhoods safer, and providing more effective and efficient government services. We continue that effort as we work each day to fulfill our commitment to provide every District resident a fair shot at opportunity. As you know, the mission of DHS is to empower every District resident to reach their full potential by providing meaningful connections to work opportunities, economic assistance, and supportive services.

Four years ago, when I assumed leadership of the Department, I worked with my team to identify five key priorities on which DHS would focus. These priorities are:

1. Developing an effective system of care for families who experience homelessness;
2. Developing an effective crisis response system for unaccompanied adults who experience homelessness;
3. Supporting TANF participants to improve their economic stability and well-being;
4. Improving the customer experience at DHS service centers; and
5. Implementing a system of services and supports for youth.

I am proud to say we are delivering on the commitments that Mayor Bowser has made over the past four years to improve services for our customers, and we have put the building blocks in place to fundamentally transform the Department. Our vision is clear - but until the



experience matches that vision for every customer and client we serve, there is still work to be done. In previous years, we focused on *developing* policies and procedures and more recently we shifted focus to *implementing* strategies that will ensure that we are providing the right services to DC residents at the right time. Recognizing the importance of the whole family, the Agency continues to evolve its policies and programs to align with a Two-Generational approach where the needs of children and their parents are addressed together, and success is defined by the family's collective well-being.

We are seeing clear evidence that these reforms are working. To that end, I would like to share with you some of our accomplishments from Fiscal Year 2018 and in Fiscal Year 2019 to date.

**Supporting families experiencing homelessness**

As reflected in *Homeward DC*, we set out to reform the *system of care* for families experiencing homelessness – preventing homelessness whenever possible; ensuring year-round access to shelter in emergencies, regardless of the temperature outside; and supporting families to regain and maintain housing with services that are responsive to their needs. Taking a systems approach to what can otherwise appear to be an intractable issue, we are making measurable progress toward ending family homelessness.

In February 2016, Mayor Bowser laid out an eight-ward strategy to close DC General and replace it with smaller, service-enriched, community-based Short-Term Family Housing programs by the end of 2018. Last spring, we began to step down the use of the DC General Family Shelter by ramping down new placements and helping families exit to permanent housing. In the fall, we closed the doors at DC General Family Shelter forever and opened three new Short-Term Family Housing programs in Wards 4, 7, and 8. Through these programs, we



are focused on providing the services that families need to get back on their feet quickly in an open and dignified setting, while also reducing the length of stay in shelter.

Access to housing is a critical component of achieving a homeless system that works. That's why we made a number of systems improvements. Over the past twelve months, the Department has started a Customer Advisory Group to hear firsthand about client experiences across the Continuum of Care; worked with providers to update the guidance that is provided to clients about the Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP); and improved training for providers. The Department also established a work group to identify and address challenges faced by clients.

We are also improving how we work with housing partners. In the coming months, we will build on the launch of the Landlord Partnership Fund to implement reforms that strengthen the District's collaboration with housing partners working with households experiencing homelessness. This will include a streamlined issue-resolution process, a re-designed lease-up packet, and a new unit-matching portal that will increase the speed and ease of housing matches for landlords and clients.

As I look ahead, our goals and challenges are clear. We will continue to build on our Homeless Prevention Program, which has prevented nearly 6,000 episodes of homelessness for District families. We will reduce the length of stay in emergency shelter and bring on the remainder of our Short-term Family Housing programs, including sites in Wards 3, 5, and 6. And we will continue to reduce our reliance on motels. We are seeing sustained progress – there are 14 percent fewer families in emergency shelter than this time last year and a 50 percent reduction of families in emergency shelter over three years - all while expanding access to shelter for



families year-round. With more access to supports early on, we saw a 26 percent decrease in entries to shelter from FY17 to FY18.

We also recognize that there is a significant gap between what the families we serve earn and the cost of rent in the District. We are working to help families close that gap by truly integrating homeless services with our TANF Employment Program. In addition to enrollment in the cash benefit, we are also helping clients get connected to, or reconnect to, a TANF employment vendor. In the coming weeks, we will begin having employees from the Economic Security Administration (ESA) on-site at our Short-Term Family Housing programs at least one day per week. We are, in the most literal sense, meeting families where they are at.

**Supporting individuals experiencing homelessness**

In my testimony last year, I mentioned the incredible work the team at DHS does to protect lives and ensure safety during extreme weather. This year is no different – although we have some new tools to do this work. We expanded our contract with the United Planning Organization (UPO) to add drivers for shelter hotline vans. We increased our use of text technology through our partnership with HopeOneSource, a text alert system open to everyone. And we leveraged the impact of engaged neighbors through a teleconference town hall and a pledge campaign. While we must continue to encourage all residents to access the ample shelter beds available, DHS helped ensure that nearly 1,800 individuals had access to a safe place indoors and a warm meal during 75 Hypothermia Alerts and eight Cold Weather Emergencies.

The efforts we are making will continue to evolve from lifesaving services to a *system* that makes homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. That requires more engagement and connection to services. One impactful development has been that, in partnership with the Downtown BID, Pathways to Housing, and HIPS, DHS opened the Downtown Day Services



Center at the New York Ave Presbyterian Church. We are proud that critical services are back in the downtown area – and in a space that is beautiful, inviting, and heavily programmed. The facility is projected to serve at least 100 individuals per day, offering everything from laundry and showers to housing assessment and employment services from our agency partners. This is the latest in a growing network of daytime services in DC, including the Adams Place Day Center, which serves an average of 176 people per day.

We are also proud to announce the launch of a diversion, or rapid exit, program for single adults called Project Reconnect. As outlined in Homeward DC, this front-end program will provide light-touch and nimble supports to help those experiencing homelessness for the first time exit shelter quickly and reconnect to their natural support networks outside of the shelter system. Coupled with increased shelter case management across the low-barrier shelter system and capital improvements at all of our year-round shelter locations, Project Reconnect is another tool in our arsenal to address the increased inflow observed over the past few years.

This year, in partnership with the ICH, we started the process to design and build a new 801 East shelter on St. Elizabeth’s Campus. This new shelter represents a new vision for low-barrier shelter. The facility will provide specialized programming for different subpopulations, and, unlike the current facility, the new 801 East will be designed to deliver more intensive day services, medical care, and case management supports, thus improving the overall quality of services. Moving to a system where a resident arrives at the District-funded daytime service centers or low-barrier shelters, will ensure they are more frequently connected to permanent housing supports.



Distinguishable from the family system, there are endless front doors to the individual shelter system. With this, we have to work differently to fully assess and connect people with the appropriate support services and housing resources. As we look ahead to the next years, in concert with the aforementioned improvements at low-barrier shelters and daytime service centers, we will continue to improve the efficiency of the Coordinated Assessment and Housing Placement (CAHP) process and better leverage available funding streams in support of our most vulnerable residents. Of course, we will continue to end homelessness with expansion of crucial housing resources such as Permanent Supportive Housing and Targeted Affordable Housing.

**Supporting TANF participants**

Last year was an exciting and pivotal year for ESA with our TANF program and with the enhancement to the business process in our service centers. I am proud of what we are doing as a community to chart a new path for serving families. We have embraced a Two-Generational approach to serving the entire family. Rather than simply looking at the head of the household and helping them gain employment, we are taking a holistic approach to serving the entire family. To this end, there are five core components: 1) education and career pathways; 2) child wellbeing; 3) health and wellbeing; 4) asset building; and 5) strengthening social bonds or social networks. If you step back, these components do not represent unique needs to families receiving TANF – they are core needs for all families. We recognize that there is a symbiotic relationship between parents and children. When parents are engaged and doing well, children will do better in school and activities. When children are doing well, parents can focus on realizing their goals.



In supporting the Two-Generational approach in partnership with the Council, we took direct and concrete steps: last April we eliminated the 60 month time limit; we minimized the sanction level to six percent; and we eliminated the cash grant step down for those families who received benefits for greater than 60 months. In October, we launched new performance-based contracts in our TEP program. All of our customers were converted from old providers to new providers, nearly seamlessly. I appreciate the work that our program staff, IT and contract teams put into this. It was a huge lift, and those teams deserve a significant amount of credit for executing literally hundreds of sequential steps to get this right. We have just completed our first quarter of services and are encouraged by high-level data that shows more people engaging in the Education and Occupational Training (formerly known as Work Readiness) component – so much so that we are increasing contract capacity.

Finally, we are adding specialized programming to the Office of Work Opportunity, to serve families for whom a traditional TEP provider may not be the best fit. We continue to forge our relationships with both community partners and sister agencies, including the Workforce Investment Council and the Office of the State Superintendent. Every day, I am reminded that success for a single family, which is our collective goal, is not predicated on a single provider or a single agency, but all of us as a community working toward that common and collective goal.

### **Improving service delivery at ESA Service Centers**

Customer service and the customer experience are foundational to our mission, and during the last year we have made significant changes at our service centers. Recognizing the need to improve our customers' experiences, we implemented a business process redesign at all five Service Centers in 2017 and have continued to make refinements. Since July, ESA Service Centers have opened at 7:30 a.m. instead of 8:15 a.m., which has helped alleviate – although not





eliminate – long lines in the early morning. In the last several weeks, we piloted a ticketing system at the H Street Service Center so that customers no longer need to stand in line to be registered while more accurately measuring wait times from the point of entry. This complements the work we already executed in redesigning the entire process. Today, 85 percent of the customers who visit a center have their presenting needs addressed that same day, as compared to 15 percent of customers two years ago.

We still have work to do to improve the customer experience, but we are taking concrete steps to get there. Release 3 of the DC Central Access System (DCAS) is in development and includes the launch of online applications. In addition, we continue to hire staff to address volume demands as well as actively developing current staff to excel at navigating the eligibility system while providing stellar customer service, all while ensuring they can remain upwardly mobile in their careers.

### **Enhancing services for youth**

Finally, DHS continues its work to improve and expand the system of services and supports for youth by strengthening families and helping young people find a path to safe and healthy development. DHS' focus is on youth who are at-risk of court-involvement, school disengagement, homelessness, and repeat teen pregnancy.

We continue implementation of the District's Strategic Plan to End Youth Homelessness, *Solid Foundations*, with the Council's support. Our efforts include further refining the coordinated entry system for young people and expanding resources available to youth experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness. Among other enhancements since our last performance hearing, we have introduced rapid rehousing for youth and added extended transitional housing beds, recognizing that young adults often need more time and services than



older adults to become better situated for economic mobility. In FY19, we are adding additional extended transitional housing as well as opening the District's first 24-hour youth drop-in center. This facility will be a one-stop shop for youth experiencing homelessness and will include low-barrier beds and an array of services co-located in the building. In addition, we currently have a solicitation out to add 29 traditional transitional housing beds and will soon be launching a shelter diversion program in partnership with the adult homelessness system.

As you know, we continue to grow our direct service programs, ACE, PASS and STEP. We are moving into our ninth year of the Parent and Adolescent Support Services (PASS) Program, our fourth year of the Alternatives to the Court Experience (ACE) Diversion Program, and our second year of the Strengthening Teens Enriching Parents (STEP) program for youth reported missing to police. With all of this, we now are directly working with more than 600 young people on any given day. Youth and families coming to our attention through any of these programs have access to case management and an array of individualized services, including in-home therapy, mentoring, restorative justice programming, crisis intervention, and parenting and youth groups, among other supports.

This fiscal year we are particularly focused on enhancing our crisis response, expanding opportunities for diversion, collaborating with partner agencies regarding youth who have repeated missing persons reports, and utilizing real-time access to attendance data to refine and improve our truancy reduction efforts. We also launched post-completion outreach to check in with families that have exited our programs to proactively monitor and mitigate to avoid re-entry into our programs. We continue to closely track outcomes in all of our youth programs, focused not only on the absence of negatives, such as rearrests and truancy, but the presence of positives, such as improved functioning and family stability. In FY18, more than 80 percent of youth



participating in these direct service programs showed improvement in their CAFAS (Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale) score. CAFAS is a tool that looks at youth functioning across life domains such as home, school, community and mental health. In addition, more than 90 percent of youth in ACE and PASS did not have further legal involvement while in these programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight key DHS achievements over the last year. We have a wide range of important work ahead of us, and I am grateful for the tremendous leadership of Mayor Bowser and Interim Deputy Mayor Turnage, as well as the collaboration and support of this Council and our stakeholders across the District.

As always, DHS strives to operate with complete transparency, and, while the work ahead will continue to be challenging, I will ensure that the communication channels with you remain open and productive. This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

