

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Human Services



Fiscal Year 2019 - 2020 Performance Oversight Hearing

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

John A. Wilson Building
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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 2019 and Fiscal Year 2020 to date.

Mayor Bowser's Fiscal Year 2019 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. At DHS, we work to provide a fair shot at opportunity by fulfilling our mission, which is to empower every District resident to reach their full potential by providing meaningful connections to work opportunities, economic assistance, and supportive services.

Five 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 five years to improve services for our customers, and we have put the building blocks in place to fundamentally transform the Department. As I have said in past testimonies, 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. That is why we continue to focus on implementing strategies that will ensure we are providing the right services to DC residents at the right time.

We are seeing clear evidence that these reforms are working. We also know where more focused attention and different strategies are needed. To that end, I would like to share with you some of our accomplishments from Fiscal Year 2019 and in Fiscal Year 2020 to date.

Supporting families experiencing homelessness

As reflected in *Homeward DC*, our approach to supporting families experiencing homelessness is focused both on systems-level reforms and on the quality of the programs and supports within that system. Together with our partners, we have taken bold and meaningful action to grow our prevention program, improve emergency shelters, and collaboratively consider improvement to rapid rehousing.

Since we launched our Homeless Prevention Program, we have assisted more than 7,000 families and prevented nearly 6,500 episodes of homelessness for District families.

As part of Mayor Bowser's eight-ward strategy to close DC General and replace it with smaller, community-based facilities, we have opened 176 units across Short-Term Family Housing programs in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. These programs, which are focused on providing the services that families need to get back on their feet while reducing the length of stay in shelter, have helped us achieve a 50 percent reduction of families in emergency shelter over four years - all while expanding access to shelter for families year-round. Looking ahead, we will open the remainder of our Short-Term Family Housing programs in Wards 1, 3, and 6. We will also continue to reduce our reliance on motels with the expectation of ending use altogether early next year.



We recognize that there is a significant gap between what the families we serve earn and the cost of rent in the District. That's why we are focused on more comprehensive integration between homeless services and our TANF Employment Program. One example is a focus on helping clients connect to, or reconnect to, a TANF employment vendor. Another is our new practice of placing employees from the Economic Security Administration (ESA) on-site at our Short-Term Family Housing programs. We are, in the most literal sense, meeting families where they are.

Finally, families exit shelter with rental assistance and supports from the Family Rehousing and Stabilization Program (FRSP), also known as rapid rehousing. Last August, DHS commenced the FRSP Task Force to collaboratively work with stakeholders to assess what is working well and opportunities to improve the program. The Task Force, which included customers, providers, landlords, advocates, and representatives from DC Government, worked to provide recommended improvements for customer experience and outcomes, program delivery, and oversight and accountability. DHS looks forward to working with key stakeholders to develop an implementation plan. I would like to take an opportunity to thank all of our stakeholders for their authentic engagement and efforts to think critically and creatively to develop policy and program design recommendations.

Supporting individuals experiencing homelessness

Distinguishable from the family system, there are endless front doors to the individual homeless services system. With this, we must continue to evolve from providing lifesaving services to a system that more fully assesses and connects unaccompanied adults to the appropriate support services and housing resources. That requires more strategic engagement, which is why earlier this year, the Department launched a housing-focused Comprehensive



Street Outreach Network to provide more comprehensive support to individuals who are unsheltered. The Network is designed to provide a coordinated entry point to services including access to housing supports; public benefits, physical and behavioral health care, and harm-reduction interventions.

Another impactful development has been the addition of the Downtown Day Services Center at the New York Ave Presbyterian Church, opened in partnership with the Downtown DC Business Improvement District and Pathways to Housing. Now a year into operating, the Center provides critical services that are centrally located in a space that is beautiful, inviting, and rich in programming. The facility has enrolled over 1,000 new clients in case management and completed close to 800 VI-SPDAT assessments to connect clients to the Continuum of Care. The Center is a critical resource for laundry, showers, lunch as well as an array of health services and agency services (e.g. employment, vital records, IDs). This complements a growing network of daytime services in the District, including the Adams Place Day Center, which serves an average of 160 people per day in Northeast DC.

We are also building on last year's launch of a diversion, or rapid exit, program for single adults called Project Reconnect. As outlined in *Homeward DC*, this program provides light-touch and nimble supports to help those recently experiencing homelessness regain housing and reconnect to their support networks outside of the shelter system. The program has successfully diverted close to 80 individuals from the shelter system, including three survivors of a fire. 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 designed to more effectively address the increased inflow into the homeless system that we have documented over the past few years.



Last year, in partnership with the ICH and in collaboration with clients and providers, we concluded the design process for a new 801 East Men's Shelter on St. Elizabeth's Campus. This represents an innovative vision for low-barrier shelter. The new site will be better equipped to offer overnight accommodations and programming designed for the range of needs and diversity of people who access shelter. We look forward to the project's groundbreaking next month. We are also in the process of renovating the Emery and Blair men's shelters, including heating and cooling systems as well as other site enhancements.

In bolstering housing resources for individuals experiencing homelessness, DHS was proud to partner with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development to secure the creation of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) in Hill East, ending homelessness for 100 of the District's most vulnerable residents. Siting PSH units in Hill East will enable residents who have found community in the Harriet Tubman shelter to make the transition to permanent housing without losing ties to that community. This site-based model provides an alternative to tenant-based PSH vouchers for clients who have different preferences or whose situations call for a greater intensity of services. This year we have the opportunity to support an unprecedented number of people secure housing through PSH and Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH), building on the 5,000 individuals we have already matched to permanent housing.

Supporting TANF and SNAP participants

Two years ago, in partnership with the Council, we made the bold decision to cut against the national trend of restricting assistance to families in dire need in our TANF program with three main changes: we eliminated the 60 month time limit; minimized the sanction level to six percent; and eliminated the cash grant step down for those families who received benefits for greater than 60 months. In October of 2018, we launched new performance-based contracts



along with an improved case management system for our TANF Employment and Educational Program (TEP) – embracing the Two-Generational (2 Gen) approach and renewing the emphasis on, and investment in, educational and job training components. We know that parents know what their families need to be successful. To that end, this year, we will continue on this journey by supporting families to be more intentional by uniformly incorporating more 2 Gen activities in their case plan. And much of it is simple and reaffirming – such as designing our systems to populate a plan with a reminder to get the flu vaccine, enroll in Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) summer activities, or seek help during tax season to apply for the Earned Income Tax Credit. Each activity within the 2 Gen construct is small – but in the aggregate, it fuels strength and stability. Not just for families receiving TANF assistance – but all of us.

As we design internal practices and customer-facing programs, equity is among our highest priorities. However, it becomes increasingly challenging to achieve in the face of painfully punitive federal regulatory changes. In the last year alone, the Trump Administration issued three regulatory changes which will impact thousands of households in the District.

First, the Trump Administration issued regulations concerning their Public Charge Rule, a degrading label in and of itself. If implemented, it would be far more difficult, if not impossible, for individuals who received a publicly-funded benefit like TANF or SNAP – of which they are legally eligible – to receive a favorable review of their green card requests.

Second, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is proposing to eliminate Broad-Based Categorical Eligible (BBCE) for SNAP. What this means is that customers who receive a TANF-funded service are categorically eligible for SNAP. BBCE not only reduces administrative burdens but also facilitates access to benefits for customers. We estimate that when this takes effect, 7,000 customers will lose their benefits. This will have a downstream



effect on children who receive free and reduced lunch eligibility at schools as well as general food insecurity for families.

Finally, and wielding the greatest impact, FNS amended the SNAP regulations such that individuals who fall under a prescriptive Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) definition will only be eligible for benefits for three out of every 36 months, unless they are working or engaged in a countable activity for 80 hours a month. With 14,500 individuals meeting the definition of the requirement, data and research suggest that over 80 percent of individuals may lose their benefits after just four months of the rule taking effect. We are working with the Mayor's office and community partners – as well as looking at best practices in other states – to mitigate the impact. Further, the District Attorney General, along with 16 other jurisdictions, filed a legal challenge to the regulations. The undeniable fact is that SNAP benefits provide a crucial avenue to support food and nutrition needs. If unchecked, the devastation of this presidential administration's changes cannot be overstated.

Improving service delivery at ESA Service Centers

We continue our focus on improving the experience of our customers and their benefits acquisition by enhancing our internal infrastructure. This includes improving the DC Access System (DCAS) and our Service Center facilities, which together support the eligibility process for nearly 300,000 District residents. Today, we are preparing to continue renovations at the Anacostia Service Center. Upon completion of the renovations, Anacostia will be the fourth Service Center to have undergone a redesign and modernization in the last four years. We have also worked to improve the customer experience by introducing a new practice by which customers are greeted immediately after passing through security. This interaction not only



improves the customer experience but also provides valuable data that can inform strategic investments and shape continuous improvement efforts.

This year we moved into the last phase of program additions to DCAS. Last September, the Department of Healthcare Finance (DHCF) completed a launch that upgraded the software and made the user interface more user-friendly for workers. This was one of nine deployments to the existing system last year, which kept us on the pathway to improvement and enabled us to handle the federal shutdown last January (2018). DHS and DHCF are working together to ensure that each fix and enhancement is strictly prioritized to ensure DC makes ongoing progress towards federal compliance, ease-of-use, and service improvements to customers.

We have exciting milestones on the horizon: once the additional releases are completed, we will sunset our 25-year old mainframe system, ACEDS, and have a single system of record. We will have a customer-facing portal where an individual can apply, review, and recertify for their benefits from anywhere.

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. Earlier this month, we had a soft launch of the 24-hour Youth Drop-In Center on Rhode Island Avenue in Northeast. This beautiful,



youth-designed facility is a one-stop shop for youth experiencing homelessness which includes space to rest, eat, shower, and do laundry, as well as receive services such as connections to housing supports, employment services, harm reduction interventions, and life skill workshops.

In FY19, we also added new transitional housing beds and extended transitional housing (ETH) beds for youth with the highest needs. ETH allows for up to six years of housing placement and intensive services. This fall, through the hard work of TCP and ICH, the District was awarded more than \$4 million from HUD for the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project, which is currently in the planning phase. DHS is working with HUD to identify gaps in services and housing for youth at risk of experiencing homelessness. I am proud to report that we have an incredibly active Youth Action Board that is intimately involved in the planning process and serving in leadership roles for this effort.

As you know, we continue to grow our direct service programs, Alternatives to the Court Experience (ACE), Parent and Adolescent Support Services (PASS), and Strengthening Teens Enriching Parents (STEP). We are moving into our tenth year of the PASS program, our fifth year of the ACE program, and our third year of the STEP program for youth reported missing to police. With all of this, we are now directly working with more than nearly 700 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.

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 FY19, more than 80 percent of youth participating



in these direct service programs showed improvement in their Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) 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 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.

