

The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Oversight Hearings

Meg Maguire, Trustee

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Good afternoon. I am Meg Maguire, Co-chair of the Housing Subcommittee of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City.

This is an *in our face moment*. Every day, Covid 19 forces us to confront the vulnerability and suffering in our beloved city. Disease and death stalk those without good health care, those in cramped and infested apartments or institutions, those losing jobs that may never return.

In response, we must substantially up DCHA's game as outlined in the agency's *20-Year Transformation Plan*. While the Mayor's 2021 budget invests \$76 million in public housing over two years, this sum is woefully short of both need and demand¹. But the commitment of city funds does provide leverage for the Mayor and Council to transform the mindset² about public housing from *top-down prescriptions for tenants to bottom-up values of tenants*. Fortunately, we already have the blueprint for this changed mindset.

In joint comments on DCHA's Transformation Plan, eight tenant advocacy groups³ presented an exceptionally clear, joint 17-page document (attached) with specific actions – *most of which cost nothing* -- that could truly transform the experience of public housing tenants from dependent recipients to valued partners in preserving their communities, ensuring their basic rights, and contributing deep knowledge of their lived experience. We urge the Mayor's DCHA appointees and the City Council to read and adopt its recommendations.

¹ On April 12, 2013 DCHA closed its waiting list when it reached more than 70,000 names, a figure that is 3.5 times the number of residents currently occupying all DCHA properties. Demand is sure to grow as more DC residents suffer the economic effects of Covid 19.

² *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Carol Dweck, Stanford University, 2006.

³ The eight groups are EmpowerDC, Bread for the City, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Legal Aid Society for DC, Legal Counsel for the Elderly, Neighborhood Legal Services Program, Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, and Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. See Joint Comments on DCHA Repositioning: <https://www.legalclinic.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Joint-Comments-on-DCHA-Repositioning-10-1-19.pdf>

The advocacy blueprint would refocus the Transformation Plan from buildings to the people who will live in those buildings, now and in the future. Specific practical no-cost recommendations would maintain and ensure enforceable rights for public housing residents including:

- resident engagement and resident-centered decision-making,
- the right to return to redeveloped properties,
- no loss of deeply affordable units through redevelopment,
- deeply affordable replacement units subsidized in perpetuity,
- reparations to public housing tenants harmed by DCHA, and
- minimal displacement.

2021 Budget Comments

We call on Acting Deputy Mayor John Falcicchio to ensure that DCHA applies the maximum capital funds to existing property renovation rather than to new construction. Public housing tenants need better living conditions now, not in some indeterminate future in yet another delayed project.

For example, the *Washington Business Journal* reported that Barry Farms and Park Morton are to receive capital funding as part of the \$76 million. Both are mixed use New Communities projects with significant legal and planning delays that are unlikely to be ready for funding in 2021. Further, public housing funds should not become a supplement for New Communities but devoted instead to the preservation and renovation of existing public housing.

While Mayor Bowser gave top priority to housing preservation in the excellent *Housing Preservation Strike Force Final Report of 2016*, her 2021 budget for the DC Housing Preservation Fund receives a mere \$1 million. Preserving public housing can help fulfill her stated priority.

Conclusion

Covid 19 must count for some higher purpose. Our city must make a far greater commitment to housing for those at or under 30% of AMI with a new mindset that puts tenants and preservation of public housing first. Only then can we *transform equity rhetoric into equity reality*.