



Testimony before the Committee on Housing

Public Oversight Hearing of the District of Columbia Housing Authority

Dana White, Director of Advocacy

February 22, 2024

Councilmember White and members of the Committee on Housing, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony about concerns and opportunities for stronger partnership with the District of Columbia Housing Authority. I'm Dana White, Director of Advocacy with Miriam's Kitchen and resident of Ward 5 in the Brentwood community. At Miriam's Kitchen we convene The Way Home Campaign, a coalition of 110 organizations and 7,000 individuals who know we can end chronic homelessness in D.C. with both proven and innovative methods that prioritize the dignity and rights of our unhoused neighbors.

In addition to the meals we serve, Miriam's Kitchen has over 300 residents in permanent supportive housing and a homeless street outreach team covering 33 square miles of the district. Our team is deeply familiar with the challenges in navigating DCHA to provide housing, a basic and urgent human need. The housing authority, however, does not consistently respond to that need with urgency, transparency, accountability, or human-centered policy. When the people we serve are impacted this way, the trust that's foundational to what we've been able to accomplish as providers is undermined. Most critically, people who are in dire need lose their hope in the district's housing system.

While we value our partnership with DCHA and recognize the strides made collaboratively toward ending chronic homelessness, my testimony today will focus on operational improvement leading to better impact.

Communication breakdowns within the housing authority leave providers and clients in the dark.

Our case managers have shared with me numerous concerns to bring to your attention.

- There is no clear chain of command or escalation at the housing authority.
- Response time is slow and issues or concerns often go unaddressed.
- When there are inquiries about the status of a voucher, no one seems to be able to track what's happening or expedite it according to urgency.
- Specific needs regarding specific voucher applications sometimes go uncommunicated to us.
- It's not unusual that incomplete or inaccurate information has been entered into the system.

- Inspections don't always get scheduled when requested and the Request For Tenancy Approval (RFTA) process is long.

These concerns present opportunities. ***We see opportunity for internal streamlining and more intentional partnership between DCHA and DHS, creating more accountability and urgency for moving applications forward, as well as transparency on both sides of the housing voucher process.*** One suggestion is that DHS program-specific staff be in-house at the housing authority. Knowing exactly who to contact with questions and those individuals providing reliable, current information would enable our team to communicate real-time information to the people we serve and advocate more effectively on their behalf. ***We would also like DCHA to explore how the RFTA process might be simplified.***

Rent Reasonableness has adversely impacted housing placement.

We recognize rent reasonableness as a well-intended strategy for keeping costs reasonable at both the individual level and for the housing system. However, people's experience of multiple denials based on rent reasonableness has not only delayed exits from homelessness, but it has also broadly reduced their access to available units and demoralized them in their search for a home. Some have even signed leases, then were notified that their units were determined to not be rent reasonable. Landlords have appealed determinations but were left at a standstill, with extended periods of no response from DCHA. It's also important to note that what was described as a now resolved "system glitch" prevented case managers from receiving access to the affordablehousing.com site for months

From the very beginning, DCHA's communication about this policy has been delayed and unclear for people we're trying to house. Clients, landlords, and providers have found its implementation to be burdensome and restrictive.

We're encouraging DCHA to

- ***Provide opportunities for better and broader understanding of rent reasonableness.***
- ***Work more diligently to make prompt determinations.***
- ***Respond to appeals in a timely manner.***
- ***Consider the restrictive impact of this policy, consider where people with and without vouchers are being priced out of the opportunity to live in the district, and apply an equity lens to ensure the implementation of our housing policies do not further gentrify or segregate.***

On behalf of my colleagues at Miriam's Kitchen, our coalition partners, our guests, our residents, and our clients, thank you for hearing these concerns. I'm available for questions now, as well as for follow-up meetings or correspondence to provide more information.