



**Verbal testimony before the Committee on Housing
FY25 Budget Oversight Hearing for the Department of Human Services (DHS)**

Delivered by Lara Pukatch, Chief Advocacy Officer at Miriam's Kitchen

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Good afternoon, Chairperson White and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. My name is Lara Pukatch, and I am the Chief Advocacy Officer at Miriam's Kitchen, where our mission is to end chronic homelessness in DC. We serve over 200 meals twice a day in our dining room, where we also offer case management services. We have a street outreach team that covers 33 square miles of the District and a Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program that serves over 300 residents. In addition, Miriam's Kitchen convenes The Way Home Campaign, an advocacy movement to end chronic homelessness that is supported by 7,000 individuals and 110 organizations.

The Mayor's Proposed FY25 Budget is more than disappointing. As written, it stands to harm Washingtonians, slashing programs that will help our neighbors with the highest needs while prioritizing wealthy businesses. As Council Member Henderson stated earlier this week, this budget "has been balanced on the backs

of Black and brown women.” Before I talk about the impact this budget will have on homelessness in the District, I must underscore how disappointed I am to see cuts in so many other areas, specifically the elimination of the Pay Equity Fund, baby bonds, the Earned Income Tax Credit, access to justice, and more. No one experiences housing instability in a vacuum, so regardless of funding for housing and homelessness, a budget that makes things worse for people living on low incomes, will make homelessness worse. Miriam’s Kitchen stands in solidarity with the Fair Budget Coalition, many members of which will speak to cuts in these areas. We believe that true community safety comes from investing in community, not in cutting our social safety net.

As you know, this budget fails to expand the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program for individuals or families and, from what we can tell, does not include any new funding for housing vouchers of any kind. It is our opinion that the PSH vouchers that have been funded but not yet utilized will be used by the end of this fiscal year. To assume that no new individuals will need PSH next year is incredibly short sighted and, at a time when unsheltered homelessness is increasing, it is hard to believe that we simply don’t have a plan to connect our most vulnerable neighbors to housing in FY25. We call on this

Council to find additional funds for PSH for the coming fiscal year.

In addition, the mayor's proposed budget includes no funding for homeless street outreach, aside from funding for staff in the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services office to address encampments. My hope is that this is an oversight, and that, as has been the case in years past, the DHS outreach budget has been inadvertently omitted. However, I would be remiss if I didn't express great concern around the possibility of increased DMHHS staffing for encampments coupled with potential cuts to the very program designed to connect those individuals to life saving services and housing. We call on this Council to invest \$6.4 million to restore and expand capacity for the Coordinated Street Outreach Network.

The budget not only fails to expand Rapid Rehousing for individuals, but also cuts the program significantly at a time when individuals are already waiting months to access this time-limited intervention. We call on this council to restore funding to singles Rapid Rehousing and to consider expanding the program even further, by our original ask of 100 additional slots. And, of course, the mayor's proposed budget does not invest nearly enough in ERAP, and we reject the

premise that people are taking advantage of these resources simply because we are there.

We are happy to see investments in non-congregate shelter and 24/7 shelter access as well as capital investments in shelter. The conditions of existing shelters absolutely must be addressed, and I hope this Council will work with DHS to ensure that physical shelter improvements are accompanied by improved, housing-focused shelter services. However, investments in shelter aren't enough. It is housing, not shelter, that ends homelessness.

Finally, we urge the Council to maintain funding for homelessness prevention and diversion programs like Project Reconnect and DC Flex, which this proposed budget has cut, to fund 150 medical respite beds as well as 24-hour harm reduction centers.

While we understand that the city is facing a large budget shortfall, there are ways to adjust that do not include cutting our social safety net. A budget that is balanced on the backs of our most marginalized community members, that wages a war on poverty, and heralds a lack of tax increases over creating the revenue

actually needed to serve our neighbors jeopardizes our collective health, safety, and well-being.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I'm happy to answer any questions.