



**Verbal testimony before the Committee on Health  
Budget Oversight Hearing for the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services**  
Delivered by Lara Pukatch, Chief Advocacy Officer at Miriam's Kitchen  
April 29, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairperson Henderson and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Lara Pukatch, and I am the chief advocacy officer at Miriam's Kitchen, where we offer on-site meals and case management, street outreach, and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). In addition, we convene The Way Home Campaign, an advocacy movement to end chronic homelessness that is supported by 7,000 individuals and 110 organizations.

I am testifying today on behalf of Miriam's Kitchen and The Way Home Campaign to express concern about upcoming encampment evictions. As you may know, the National Park Service (NPS) and the DC government are slated to evict and permanently close 7 encampment sites in Foggy Bottom in May, a harmful approach that will displace up to 70 people. While a small NPS encampment closure was scheduled months ago, NPS has recently expanded the scope of these evictions and DMHHS has taken this opportunity to close various sites on the same timeline.

**Displacement harms our neighbors.**

Clearing encampments damages trust and relationships that outreach case managers have worked hard to build with residents. These are some of our most vulnerable neighbors and evictions will make it difficult for them to access the life-saving support and services they need to survive. Homelessness is traumatic and the forceful eviction of encampments, often under threat of arrest, only adds to that trauma.

**Encampment evictions make it harder to end homelessness.**

An estimated 20 people living in the encampments slated for eviction are matched to a housing voucher. While DC must accelerate its housing process, displacing individuals will only make their housing process longer – or disrupt it all together. National and local experts and leaders



agree housing and supportive services end homelessness, while encampment evictions make it worse.

**Everyone needs a safe place to sleep – encampment evictions take that away.**

DMHHS is moving forward with encampment evictions in the context of a proposed local budget with no new housing vouchers, decreased funding for street outreach, and cuts to DC's social safety net. There are not enough shelter beds for those being displaced and many individuals were already displaced from McPherson Square, underscoring that there is nowhere else to go. If DMHHS moves forward, they will be clearing encampments without any resources to offer residents.

**New, non-congregate shelter provides a safe solution to unsheltered homelessness.**

A small, dignified non-congregate shelter, the Aston, was scheduled to open close to the encampments in question last fall, but has been delayed until August. Clearing encampments when there is a non-congregate shelter solution just months from opening is particularly egregious.

We urge the Office of the Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services, and this Council to:

- Address health and safety concerns in encampments without evicting residents.
- Stop evictions until The Aston opens and every resident is provided with a solution.
- Address barriers to DC's larger shelter system and expand non-congregate shelter capacity.
- Shift DMHHS financial and personnel focus from closing encampments to connecting residents to housing.
- Fund programs and services that end homelessness such as permanent supportive housing, street outreach, and more.

No matter our race or income, we all need a safe place to sleep. Homelessness is increasing across the country as more households struggle to make ends meet. Clearing encampments



and threatening arrest will make homelessness worse and make it even harder for people to get and keep a roof over their head.

Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.