



Testimony before the Committee on the Entire

Budget Oversight Hearing for the Local Budget Support Act

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

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Mendelson, and members of the Council. 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 we offer on-site meals and case management, street outreach, and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). 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.

Unfortunately, the Mayor's proposed budget falls far short of funding the proven and urgently needed programs that would prevent and address homelessness in the District. The proposed budget includes no new housing vouchers, decreases current capacity of street outreach, and cuts Rapid Rehousing for singles in half.

At the same time, the budget fails to address one of the root causes of homelessness in DC, our affordable housing crisis, by cutting programs such as the Housing Production Trust Fund and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). If passed, this budget will harm those who are already struggling, and increases the risk of homelessness for our neighbors living on the lowest incomes.

More PSH is needed, and implementation concerns are more than manageable.

As you know, PSH is a proven best practice for ending chronic homelessness that saves lives. CAHP data shows that as many as 2,000 unaccompanied residents currently need PSH. While DC absolutely must accelerate its housing process, frustrations about delays in implementation are not reason to flat fund this program entirely. Of the historic thousands of vouchers funded over the past two fiscal year, only 385 PSH vouchers for singles remain to be implemented. We anticipate that those vouchers will be matched by the end of this fiscal year, which means that



under the proposed budget, we would indeed be operating with no new vouchers. Put another way, if someone experiencing homelessness needs PSH come October 1st, we would need to tell them, at best, to wait an *entire year* before they could even *begin* a housing process. As homelessness increases across the country and DC continues to criminalize those sleeping outside, a budget with no new PSH vouchers is simply unacceptable.

For members of this council that remain concerned about the implementation of PSH vouchers, I would be happy to continue to discuss the many recommendations we have made to accelerate the housing process and facilitate program expansion.

It's worth noting that the mayor proposed \$7.4 million for 25 FTEs at DHS for the sole purpose of PSH implementation – at a time when she is proposing not to even expand the program. We recommend that some of this funding be used for additional housing vouchers.

We call on this Council to invest \$36.6 million to expand the PSH program for singles to serve an additional 1,260 people.

The mayor's proposed budget also flat funds PSH for families, despite over 500 families in need of this housing solution. We call on the council to invest \$22.8 million to serve an additional 580 families.

With homelessness rising, drastic cuts to DC's social safety net, and the upcoming termination of 2,000 families from Rapid Rehousing, this decision will hurt families and have dire consequences for the homeless services system.

Homeless Street Outreach – cuts to FY24 funding levels, failure to meet current needs.

As of the January 2023 Point-In-Time count, unsheltered homelessness is up 19% from the previous year and is at its highest point since 2017. Homeless street outreach connects individuals living outside with life-saving resources and supports and helps our neighbors to navigate the housing process.



Earlier this budget season, we called on Mayor Bowser to invest \$6.4 million for homeless street outreach to maintain current levels of outreach capacity and to increase support to specific neighborhoods that have seen an uptick in street homelessness.

While the Mayor's budget maintains last year's *local* funding amount for homeless street outreach, there is no money to make up for the federal money that is ending come October or to account for increased need. The result is that fewer outreach case managers will be on the streets and less support will be available for those most at risk come October 1st.

An additional \$2.9 million for street outreach is needed to:

- make up for outreach capacity lost through the sunset of the CARE pilot, a time-limited initiative to address unsheltered homelessness in tent encampments.
- Add encampment focused outreach in Wards 6, 7, and 8 (where it has not previously existed)
- Address increased outreach needs in specific neighborhoods, such as U street and Georgia Avenue

Decreasing street outreach capacity while the city is poised to evict 70 people from tent encampments who have nowhere else to go is woefully shortsighted and downright cruel. We are engaging in behaviors that we know harm residents, that are proven to make homelessness worse, not solve it, all while cutting the programs and services our neighbors need to survive.

Rapid Rehousing (RRH) for Individuals – cut by half.

Rapid re-housing is a time-limited subsidy that supports individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, by helping to secure and maintain housing during periods of financial hardship. Currently, the singles RRH program serves 600 individuals, which is estimated to be just half of those who need it and have joined the waitlist for the program. The mayor's proposed budget cuts singles rapid rehousing in half, which means not only that 300 fewer people will be able to access the program next year but also that wait times, which



are already as long as 4.5 months, will increase dramatically. We call on this council to restore the cuts to Rapid Rehousing for singles and expand the program to meet the need.

For the sake of time, I will attach The Way Home Campaigns full FY25 recommendations for the DC Council to my testimony, which outlines additional funding needed for programs such as ERAP, LRSP, HPTF, DC Flex, medical respite beds, and more.

Miriam's Kitchen is a proud member of the Fair Budget Coalition. We Safety is investing in the people and in know this Council believes in a more equitable DC and in a safer city. Safety is investing in the people and in safe, affordable, accessible, and stable housing.

We also stand with the Just Recovery Coalition and call on this Council to reverse harmful cuts by taxing wealth to raise revenue for essential investments in community.

Thank you.