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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization
Committee on Human Services
March 8, 2018

Public Hearing:
Performance Oversight Hearing
Interagency Council on Homelessness

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairwoman Bonds, Chairwoman Nadeau, and members of the Committees. My name is Aubrey Edwards-Luce. I am a senior policy attorney at Children's Law Center.¹ I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Throughout our years of serving marginalized and disempowered communities, we have seen to how various interagency failures have led to our youth and family clients sleeping in cars, on the streets, or in shelters. Our clients' experiences fuel our commitment to work with the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH).

Youth homelessness is a tragedy that far too many of our clients and their peers experience. Every year approximately 800 of the District's youth under the age of 25 are either literally homeless or functionally homeless, which includes couch surfing.² In Fiscal Year 2013, nearly 12% of the 698 youth who accessed homelessness services were under the age of 18 and approximately 45% were between the ages of 18 and 21.³ Sadly, we know some youth have transitioned from the care of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) to the homeless services system, when their social workers have driven youth to shelters on their 21st birthday. CFSA reports that 19% of youth lack stable

housing upon exiting its custody.⁴ Youth who experience homelessness often have poor educational, physical health, and mental health outcomes.⁵ They also are at an increased risk of participating in criminal activity as a means of survival.⁶

Preventing and addressing youth homelessness and its consequences requires a coordinated interdisciplinary effort. I personally began working with the ICH's Youth Working Group in 2017 as it started to implement the ICH's Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness (Solid Foundations Plan).⁷ Since that time, the Youth Working Group has become the Youth Committee. We are pleased to report that our experience with the ICH's Youth Working Group and Committee has been marked by transparency, collaboration, and effectiveness. The remainder of my testimony will recall the Youth Committee's successes as it executed the Solid Foundations Plan during fiscal year 2017 (FY17) and fiscal year 2018 (FY18) thus far. I will then turn to one of the challenges ICH needs to overcome during FY18 and briefly touch on a concern we have encountered while working with ICH on issues of adult and family homelessness.

Implementation of the Solid Foundations Plan

A Transparent Plan and Process

During FY17, the Youth Committee has followed the comprehensive and clear guidance found in its Solid Foundations Plan. The Solid Foundations Plan provides a summary of the causes of youth homelessness, a synopsis of the needs youth have

when facing literal homelessness or housing insecurity, a description of the array of services that DC was offering, and a five-year plan to “create a youth system of care that has the capacity to serve all youth experiencing homelessness without referral to adult programming or long waitlists.”⁸

According to the Solid Foundations Plan, the following seven objectives are necessary so that fewer youth experience homelessness and more youth obtain permanent, stable housing faster:⁹

- Objective 1: Expand/enhance homelessness prevention efforts in systems that work with vulnerable youth before they become homeless.
- Objective 2: Expand and enhance outreach to, assessment of, and reunification efforts for youth experiencing housing instability.
- Objective 3: Increase the dedicated supply of shelter and housing options for youth experiencing homelessness.
- Objective 4: Support vulnerable youth to develop healthy, permanent connections with peers and adults.
- Objective 5: Ensure vulnerable youth have opportunities to finish their education and experience early success in the labor market.
- Objective 6: Support the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of vulnerable youth.
- Objective 7: Build capacity among providers and system partners to scale programs effectively.

Children’s Law Center supports the Solid Foundations Plan because it offers a data-driven, public health approach to address the material and developmental needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Additionally, it recognizes that the following groups of youth are disproportionately represented amongst youth experiencing

homelessness: 1) youth who identify as LGBTQ; 2) youth who are being sex trafficked; 3) youth who are involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems; 4) youth who are undocumented/non-English speaking; and 5) youth with behavioral health needs. The Solid Foundations Plan prioritizes prevention by requiring the development of strategies to help stabilize both individual youths who are nearing homelessness and groups of youth that are at increased risk for homelessness.¹⁰ Lastly, we support this plan because it acknowledges the need for increased interdisciplinary coordination and accountability “to create a comprehensive system of care that not only ensures youth have a safe place to sleep at night, but equally important, that vulnerable youth are supported to overcome barriers that threaten successful transition to adulthood[.]”¹¹

We appreciate the transparent process utilized by the Youth Working Group and Committee during FY17. The leaders of the Youth Working Group and Committee provided attendees with the agendas and documents for review well in advance of the meetings. They solicited feedback from providers and advocates and allow multiple avenues for participants to provide their input.¹²

A Collaborative Enterprise

The Youth Committee has been co-chaired by a government representative and a community advocate, which has fostered government-community collaboration during our meetings. This partnership proved very important, as the Youth Committee members have worked to refine the Youth Coordinated Assessment and Housing

Placement (CAHP) Policy. The Youth CAHP Policy lays out a de-centralized approach to connect youth to the housing that best fits their needs in the timeliest fashion possible. Children’s Law Center believes the CAHP policy will be effective because the ICH Youth Committee developed it with collaboration. During our many discussions, government representatives listened as service providers and advocates described the negative impacts that poor placement matches were having on youths’ abilities to find permanent housing later. Simultaneously, providers and advocates were able to learn about the limitations and requirements of the government’s information systems and assessment tools. Because of this thoughtful process, the draft of the Youth CAHP Policy is youth-focused and provider-informed.

We hope to see continued government-community collaboration during FY18, especially as the Youth Committee applies for the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program grant. This grant will require multiple government agencies, community partners, and youth who have experienced homelessness to work together and develop “innovative and effective ways to reduce youth experiencing homelessness.”¹³ From our perspective, members of the Youth Committee are very excited about the opportunity to come together and secure this competitive award for the youth of the District. We are hopeful that government agencies such as CFSA, the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), and the

Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS) will provide more support for this effort, as their participation will prove essential.

A Data-Driven, Youth Engaging Effort

During FY17, the Youth Committee successfully merged its value of youth engagement and its commitment to being data driven by involving youth in data collection for the annual Youth Count.¹⁴ The annual Youth Count is an effort of the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness to identify every youth who is experiencing literal and functional homelessness in DC.¹⁵ Members of the ICH recruited some of their youth clients to volunteer as members of the street-based outreach team and survey administrators for the Youth Count. Youth volunteers received training and were viewed as valuable partners to the effort. They were also acknowledged for their participation.

We are hopeful that the Youth Committee will use these same youth engagement skills as it seeks to empower youth to be partners in the effort to end youth homelessness. The Youth Committee has recognized that ending youth homelessness requires a youth-informed street outreach protocol and improved mental health, education, and employment services.¹⁶ Youth with lived experiences of homelessness have so much to teach us on these topics.

Youth Committee members have acknowledged that young people face unique barriers, such as economic scarcity and ageism, to participating in the Youth Committee. It is essential that the Youth Committee remove the barriers to youth engagement in order to achieve its goal of developing and meaningfully collaborating with a Youth Action Board. As the Youth Committee identifies and removes the barriers to youth engagement during FY18, I expect that the Youth Committee's efforts will be even more youth-informed and even more effective.

Upcoming Challenges for the ICH Youth Committee

One of the primary reasons that Children's Law Center supports the Solid Foundations Plan is that it establishes prevention as a strategy to end youth homelessness. Half of the Solid Foundations Plan's "Front Porch" Services address prevention. The "Front Door Prevention and Stabilization" services are supposed to offer financial assistance and other services to avert literal homelessness. The "Upstream Prevention" services are supposed to coordinate "discharge planning and housing supports for youth who are exiting or aging out of other systems" such as CFSA or DYRS.¹⁷ In order to further the successful implementation of the Solid Foundations Plan during FY18, the Youth Committee has prioritized engaging partners who have had limited engagement in the Youth Committee and developing transition planning protocols for youth who are receiving services from other agencies.¹⁸

We are pleased to learn that when transitioning the Youth Working Group into the Youth Committee, the ICH amended its bylaws to require participation from the following government agencies: DHS, DBH, CFSA, DYRS, Office of the State Superintendent for Education, DC Public School, Metropolitan Police Department, Mayor's Office on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Questioning Affairs, and a Community Collaborative applicant. Children's Law Center is deeply disturbed by the experiences our former clients have with homelessness or housing instability after they leave CFSA custody.¹⁹ We are concerned that youth exiting DYRS custody are experiencing similar rates of homelessness or housing instability. We echo the Youth Committee's desire to ensure that youth are not discharged from other agencies to the streets or the homeless services system. For this reason, it is essential that all the government agencies –especially DYRS and CFSA –participate in the Youth Committee meetings during FY18.

A Different Experience with ICH on Adult and Family Homelessness

Children's Law Center has historically worked with ICH on adult and family issues. Unfortunately, we had concerns about the processes that ICH used during the discussions about the amendments to the Homeless Services Reform Act. Although DHS and ICH held three meetings with providers and a few advocates, the process employed during those meetings prevented advocates from providing meaningful feedback. Advocates and community members were provided the full text of the

legislation at the first meeting and were told that DHS and ICH were not looking for feedback. In fact, the legislation was transmitted to the DC Council between the first and second meetings, thereby ensuring that our input would not be included. Given the charge of ICH, to engender collaboration, we would have expected a more inclusive process that valued the expertise and perspective of advocates and providers.

Children’s Law Center is concerned that some government members do not value the expertise and perspective that advocates bring to the ICH forum. Our concern was intensified when we learned that staff from the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless had been discharged from the ICH seat designated for advocates.

Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless roots its system advocacy in their 30-plus years of working with clients who struggle with homelessness and poverty. Their voice at the table is obviously important. We hope that ICH’s work on adult and family issues will be more transparent and collaborative in the remainder of FY18.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the performance of ICH. I look forward to answering any questions.

¹ Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

² ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 23.

³ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 23.

⁴ CFSA. *Commitment to Positive Outcomes FY 16 vs. FY 17 Performance*.

⁵ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 12.

⁶ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 2.

⁷ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf.

⁸ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 27.

⁹ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 32.

¹⁰ The Solid Foundations Plan calls for targeted research, solutions, and trainings to address the needs of these vulnerable groups of youth. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 11, 34, and 38.

¹¹ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 32.

¹² For example, we set priorities for 2018 over the course of three meetings. During the first meeting, we reviewed the objectives set by the Solid Foundations Plan and described the process for approving the priorities. The second meeting provided attendees ample time to offer their opinions about the working group's priorities. At the third meeting, we solidified the list of priorities that would be submitted to the ICH executive committee for approval. Between those meetings, members had the opportunity to email their suggestions to the working group's leaders.

¹³ ICH FY17 Performance Oversight Pre-Hearing Responses, Q2.

¹⁴ The Youth Count is also known as the Homeless Youth Census.

¹⁵ Youth Count DC. *About*. Retrieved from <http://www.youthcountdc.org/about.html>.

¹⁶ ICH FY17 Performance Oversight Pre-Hearing Responses, Q2.

¹⁷ ICH. *Solid Foundations DC: Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. (May 2017). Retrieved from

https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Solid%20Foundations%20DC%20web%201.5.pdf, at 22.

¹⁸ These priorities were submitted to the ICH Executive Committee for approval in early 2017.

¹⁹ CFSAs reports that 19% of youth lack stable housing upon exiting CFSAs custody. CFSAs. *Commitment to Positive Outcomes FY 16 vs. FY 17 Performance*.