

600 children living in Washington, DC homeless shelter

By Naomi Spencer
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Washington, DC, offers one of the starkest portraits of the social crisis in America. At the District's former General Hospital, a shelter for homeless families houses 372 adults and some 600 children in tiny living quarters. Families sleep with their scant belongings in areas barely bigger than office cubicles.

The city's homeless crisis has exploded since the onset of the recession. Lack of work and unaffordable rent have pushed the number of families living in the streets up by 74 percent in the past five years. Last year alone, the number of homeless families rose 18 percent.

Advocates estimate that as many as 1,014 families in the city are now homeless, a group that includes at least 1,600 children.

Applicants for rent vouchers face years-long waiting lists and a safety net system that is terminally underfunded, understaffed, and overloaded. "It's like paperwork on top of paperwork—they have to prove they don't have a safe place to stay," Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless attorney Marta Beresin told the *Washington Post* in an article published February 11.

At the same time that homeless services are overwhelmed, the city has a budget surplus of \$417 million. Democratic mayor Vincent Gray recently announced a \$100 million budget for affordable housing, most slated for 10,000 senior and low-income housing units. Even with the funding, however, an analysis by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute found the apartments may be inadequately subsidized to help the poorest residents, especially those who are homeless and jobless.

While poverty deepens in many neighborhoods of the nation's capital, D.C. has some of the highest rent rates in the country, a state of affairs that is widening along with the income gap. Driving the high housing costs is

a tiny segment of the population, many working in government or military services, who have seen their wealth soar. One in seven D.C. residents fall in the top 5 percent of the income distribution, earning more than \$191,500 per year. A construction boom catering to this layer has produced penthouses and luxury townhomes costing millions of dollars. Neighborhoods across the city have seen their cost of living soar as a result.

The *Washington Post* notes that overcrowding in the D.C. General shelter is due in part to a decision by the city to cut back on subsidies to temporarily house homeless families in motels along New York Avenue. This year, about 50 families are being put up in motel rooms, compared to some 200 families last winter. The city spent \$3 million on the accommodations last year because of a law mandating that residents must be sheltered in motels when the city's emergency housing facilities are full and the temperature is below freezing.

That arrangement produced crises for numerous families. Homeless mothers living in the motels were warned by shelter officials that they could be investigated by the child welfare agency for endangerment. Fearing that their children would be taken away from them because of the precarious living arrangements, many mothers left the homeless system altogether. This put families into situations potentially more dangerous, including living out on the streets and moving back in with abusive spouses or relatives.

At the General Hospital shelter, families face the misery of a refugee camp. The *Post* describes parents struggling to bathe their children in cold showers and feeding them poor-quality microwaveable food. Residents are not allowed to cook or bring food that is not microwaveable. The shelter provides only breakfast and dinner; its \$300,000 lunch budget was cut last year.

“Outside a few activity rooms, there is no real place to play,” the *Post* notes. “For a few weeks last month, the heat went out in some rooms, and there weren’t enough cribs for all the babies.” Legal aids have pointed to the danger posed by the hard hospital floors for infants not confined to a crib, noting that failure to provide safe bedding is a violation of the city’s code. One mother who brought a crib too large to fit in her allotted space was told to “go buy one,” according to the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless.

“It’s like rock bottom for me,” said a 21-year-old mother of a 4-year-old. “I’m tired of seeing four walls. It’s like I’m in prison or something.” A 37-year-old mother of five described sharing a room with all of her children. “It’s stressful, it’s really stressful. Some days I literally sit in the room and my kids are asleep and I’m sitting and just watching them, feeling...I just feel displaced. My kids feel displaced.” The children do their homework lying on their beds. “There’s no tables, no desks, no nothing.... I just think about getting out of here.”

For fun, the children run through the empty halls of the hospital, which was closed in 2001. Volunteers with a homeless youth advocacy group visit a couple of times a week to provide activities. There is no playground.

The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless reports that since January 7, D.C. General has been running at its full capacity of 271 family units. The impact of the shelter being full has meant that “Families sleeping in places like parks and cars with children when the temperature is just barely above freezing will have no access to shelter.” Once it is spring, families presently staying in the shelter will be turned out, meaning that “D.C. children will once again go more than half a year without any emergency shelter safety net, leaving them in dangerous settings.”

Many families are split up or rejected apparently because their needs are too great for the shelter to meet. “A woman who was more than eight months pregnant was turned away...and told to return when she delivered the baby,” the Legal Clinic reported. “In multiple cases, the father of the children, the fiancé of the mother or an over-18-year-old child was not allowed to be placed with the family in the shelter.”

The Legal Clinic reported that the General Hospital has had heat outages in many common areas and rooms

since Christmas. “One client, who had an infant daughter, reported that she had been requesting a space heater from staff for three weeks to no avail,” the advocacy organization stated. She was not moved to a room with heat until the organization confronted city’s housing department about the problem.

Families have also reported that the building is “infested with mice, bedbugs, and water bugs. Some families also reported being bitten by spiders.”

This humanitarian catastrophe has been met by city officials with indifference and denial. Mayor Gray, questioned by *Washington Post* reporter Courtland Milloy about the Legal Clinic findings, declared, “I’m over at that shelter all the time, and I don’t think anybody can credibly say that we aren’t doing things to help the homeless.”

“I haven’t seen any bedbugs,” Gray said. “I’m always interacting with those young people over there and, frankly, I’ve never seen any evidence of what that advocacy group is talking about.”

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