



***Laura Green Zeilinger, Director
DC Department of Human Services***

On December 29, 2014, Mayor-elect Bowser named Laura Green Zeilinger as Director of the Department of Human Services (DHS). Ms. Zeilinger is responsible for a 973-person agency that is charged with assisting low-income individuals and families to maximize their potential for economic security.

Ms. Zeilinger is an attorney with a long-standing commitment to underserved populations. Most recently, she served as the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, where she was responsible for the implementation of *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, an effort that includes the coordination of Federal homelessness policies among 19 Federal departments and agencies, as well as partnerships with state and local communities, non-profits, and the private sector. She joined USICH in 2011, and prior to her appointment as Executive Director in 2014, she served as Deputy Director.

Previously, Ms. Zeilinger served at the District of Columbia Department of Human Services (DHS) as Deputy Director for Program Operations. There, she led the creation of more than 1,000 units of permanent supportive housing as part of the Homeless No More Plan. She designed and implemented the District's Housing First Initiative, which connected 500 individuals and 80 families to housing stability in its first year alone. Prior to her work with DHS, Ms. Zeilinger served as the mayor's liaison to DHS and the Office of Disability Rights. She has also led international economic development efforts, managing a technical assistance project to reform the pension system in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Ms. Zeilinger is an alumna of Sarah Lawrence College and a graduate of the Washington College of Law at American University.

Introduction

District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser and the District's Department of Human Services have made ending homelessness, including family homelessness, [a priority](#). The District is implementing a range of interventions, guided by their local [strategic plan](#) to end homelessness that was released in March 2015, including investing heavily in affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, and rapid re-housing; building a crisis response system; launching new prevention and diversion services; enhancing coordination across mainstream and homelessness assistance systems; and shifting systems to revolve around the needs and goals of families rather than the bureaucracy of programs. This brief summarizes DC's work to prevent and end family homelessness, shares some lessons learned from their work, and proposes opportunities for Federal actions to further support the development of coordinated systems that can better respond to family homelessness.

Family Homelessness in Washington, DC: Background

While family homelessness has declined nationally over the last several years, family homelessness in the District has [increased dramatically](#)—nearly 80 percent since 2010. The District attributes the increase in family homelessness to an extreme lack of affordable housing and a growing [opportunity gap](#). The Bowser administration has taken significant steps to reverse major causes of family homelessness, including investing 100 million local dollars in affordable housing each of the next four years. Family homelessness in the District is also more visible than most other jurisdictions due to a seasonal right to shelter during the winter season and to policies that ensure families who enter shelter stay until they are connected with permanent housing. Knowing that homelessness is not caused by the weather and that the spike in demand for shelter puts unnecessary pressure and constraints on the system during the winter months, the Bowser administration has implemented a year-round access to family shelter policy. This ensures families can access the services they need, when they need it. It also serves to normalize the flow in and out of emergency shelter throughout the year—creating a more effective and efficient system.

Building an Effective Crisis Response System for Families and Balancing the Needs of the Entire System

A major focus of DHS' strategies for ending family homelessness has been the development and implementation of an effective crisis response system, with a focus on prevention and rapid connection to permanent housing. When District families experience a housing crisis, they seek services at a central intake and referral center, the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. Data on families seeking assistance at the center revealed opportunities to effectively support families to resolve housing crises without a shelter stay: 45 percent of families applied for shelter more than once and often more than two times before becoming eligible, and 43 percent of the heads of households were under the age of 24. This data points to significant missed opportunities to intervene with more robust prevention services when families first begin to seek help, and to support family relationships—as safe and appropriate—to preserve support structures and housing stability for young families.

Along with providing access to emergency shelter year-round, the Administration is improving conditions at emergency shelters—closing the DC General family shelter and replacing it with smaller, more family-centered and supportive emergency housing facilities across the District. The Bowser administration has also made historic local investments in permanent housing solutions (targeted affordable housing, rapid re-housing, and supportive housing) with an increase of more than \$20 million for these programs in the FY 2016 budget. Together, these actions will increase the pace of exits from shelter into permanent housing—ensuring homelessness is brief.

Evolution of the Front Door: Program Integration and Serving the Most High-Risk Families

The District is seeing some early signs of success in engaging families in services, as a direct result of integrating mainstream systems into the intake assessment and eligibility process. The front door of the DC family homelessness system (Virginia Williams Family Resource Center) has on-site, integrated support from child welfare programs, schools, health care, and TANF and employment services, as well as domestic violence support. Through this approach, the District is able to increase information sharing and unify case planning across systems to ensure families are receiving individualized services tailored to their needs.

Beginning in 2015, the District launched CrossConnect, a multi-system initiative designed to address the needs of families identified as extremely high-risk of homelessness and instability based on their involvement with multiple agencies—including the homeless assistance system, TANF, behavioral healthcare, and child welfare. CrossConnect allows families to work with a lead case manager of their choice who coordinates across systems to make sure every participating agency is working with the family toward the goal of housing stability. CrossConnect has shifted the service model to empower families and revolve around their needs. The District will serve 160 multi-system involved families in FY 2016 and is building on lessons learned from this initiative to: provide targeted, enhanced supports to young parents in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and high crime; improve policies in the TANF program to support families to focus on vital child welfare or behavioral health and housing needs; and reduce duplicative services.

There is significant overlap between the District's homeless assistance system and the TANF program; 95 percent of all families in shelter receive or are eligible for TANF. Families exiting homelessness with rapid re-housing engage in TANF employment programs at higher rates than the TANF population at large, demonstrating that stability in housing supports the ability to seek employment, enroll in educational and occupational skills training, and obtain employment. As the District is set to impose TANF time limits for the first time beginning on October 1, 2016, supporting more families to replace income from TANF with income from paid employment is a critical priority for the District.

Lessons Learned

Through experience and data analysis, the District has identified lessons and challenges relevant for other communities:

- Making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring for families necessarily entails major investments in affordable housing, as well as effective efforts to support people living in areas of concentrated poverty to access sustainable employment at a living wage and via career pathways.
- Family homelessness is a multigenerational issue, therefore solutions for preventing and ending homelessness should use multigenerational approaches to address the needs of all members of the household.
- Family homelessness disproportionately affects single mothers of color who are under the age of 24; therefore the solutions to family homelessness need to be adapted to meet the developmental needs of parenting youth and their minor children.
- While the primary role of the homeless assistance system is to address immediate housing needs, the interventions provided can also support families to define paths to long-term stability, and can support families to access mainstream programs to advance on that path.
- TANF is a critical resource to meeting the emergency housing needs of families, as well as to providing supports for families to access employment and successfully exit homelessness.
- Stable housing plays a key role in supporting engagement in employment and education.

Opportunities for Increased Federal Partnership

The following actions have been identified as opportunities for the Federal government to help communities achieve the goal of preventing and ending family homelessness in 2020:

- Increased investments in affordable housing;
- Provision of greater clarity to child welfare systems on their role in preventing and ending family homelessness, in particular as it relates to services for pregnant and parenting youth;
- Advocacy for and clarity regarding Title IV-E Waiver renewals -- states are hesitant to make long-term plans for prevention and innovation projects begun under IV-E without more confidence in renewals; and
- Guidance regarding how homeless assistance systems and domestic violence systems can most effectively work together, share data, and develop a strategic framework to address the needs of families.