

June 7, 2019

Tyrone Garrett  
Executive Director  
District of Columbia Housing Authority  
1133 North Capitol Street NE  
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Mr. Garrett:

We, the undersigned organizations, write to you regarding the District of Columbia Housing Authority's ("DCHA") policy of not granting families extensions of their initial vouchers, except as a reasonable accommodation. [1] This policy is unreasonable and out of touch with DC's exorbitantly expensive and competitive rental market. Instead, DCHA should adopt a framework for determining when it will grant extensions that considers the realities of low-income District residents' lives and the many barriers they face when searching for a home. [2] Our proposed policy is enclosed with this letter.

When a family comes off of the Housing Choice Voucher Program ("HCVP") waitlist and is approved, DCHA's practice is to issue the family a voucher that is valid for 180 days. This means that each family has 180 days to locate and lease up in a suitable unit. If the voucher expires before the family is able to lease up, DCHA's current policy is that it will only grant an extension as a reasonable accommodation. This means that, unless the reason the family was unable to place its voucher is due to a disability, the family will lose its voucher. With a closed wait list that has nearly 40,000 families on it, this effectively means the family will never get another housing voucher.

DCHA's draconian policy of denying all requests for extensions except those based on a reasonable accommodation fails to consider the many reasons a family may try its hardest, but still fail to find a suitable home within six months. Families face a myriad of barriers when trying to place vouchers. Landlords often impose irrelevant and unreasonable credit score requirements on voucher holders or have a blanket policy against renting to voucher holders. Though source of income discrimination is illegal in the District, it is common and remains difficult to enforce in a meaningful or timely manner. Application fees and other fees associated with applying for apartments are often prohibitively expensive. In our increasingly expensive city, units that fall within the HCVP payment standard are becoming scarcer and harder to find. Families with children are left to find suitable housing in a city with a dearth of units with three or more bedrooms. [3] Additionally, a history of domestic violence or interest in avoiding disruption to the education of children often place further geographic limitations on voucher holders' housing searches. These are just some of the barriers a family may face while looking for safe and stable housing, and they are all reasons DCHA should consider when deciding whether to grant a

family's request for a voucher extension. (While we are aware that DCHA employs a few housing navigators, our understanding is that they are primarily assisting with public housing residents relocating, and that they are not accessible to voucher holders in a way that would substantially reduce these barriers.)

DCHA's mission is to provide safe and affordable housing to low- and no-income District residents. But, its refusal to grant voucher extensions has caused District families to lose perhaps their only chance at affordable housing after waiting for decades on the wait list. Our proposed solution is a fair way for DCHA to determine when to grant extensions, and will ensure that families trying to find suitable housing are not penalized for circumstances outside of their control.

We request a meeting to discuss this policy in detail and to talk through our recommendation. To discuss availability or any other questions, please contact Amanda Korber at (202) 386-6692 or [akorber@legalaiddc.org](mailto:akorber@legalaiddc.org).

Sincerely,

Amara Legal Center

Ayuda

Barry Farms Tenants and Allies Association

Bread for the City

Collaborative Solutions for Communities

Community Connections

DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence

DC Fights Back

DC for Democracy

DC Grassroots Planning Coalition

DC Jail and Prison Advocacy Project

DC Hunger Solutions

DC Statehood Green Party

DC Volunteers Lawyers Project

DV LEAP

Deborah Epstein (for identification purposes only: Co-Director, Georgetown University Law Center, Domestic Violence Clinic)

Empower DC

Equal Rights Center

Everyone Home DC

Fair Budget Coalition

Matthew I. Fraidin (for identification purposes only: Associate Dean, Experiential Education, University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law)

Law Students in Court

Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia

Legal Counsel for the Elderly  
Many Languages One Voice (MLOV)  
Mary's House for Older Adults  
Miriam's Kitchen  
ONE DC  
Open City Advocates  
Pathways to Housing  
Positive Force  
RESULTS DC  
Valerie Schneider (for identification purposes only: Director, Clinical Law Center, Howard  
University School of Law)  
Southeast Ministry  
TENAC (DC's Tenants' Advocacy Coalition)  
Thrive DC  
Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs  
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless  
We Are Family

cc: Carloyn Punter, Director, Housing Choice Voucher Program  
Ken Slaughter, General Counsel  
Neil Albert, Chair, Board of Commissioners  
William Slover, Commissioner  
Ken Grossinger, Commissioner  
Kenneth Council, Commissioner  
Antonio Taliaferro, Commissioner  
Aquarius Vann-Ghasri, Commissioner  
Brian Kenner, Commissioner  
Jose Arnaldo Ortiz Gaud, Commissioner  
Makeisha Neal Jones, Commissioner  
Franselene St. Jean, Commissioner  
LeJuan Strickland, Commissioner

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[1] "Family" and "families" are used to refer to all applicant households, including individuals with no minor children in the household.

[2] We understand that DCHA applies this same voucher extension policy to families that already participate in the HCVP and are issued a transfer voucher when DCHA terminates its Housing Assistance Payment contract with the landlord. We believe that this practice is unlawful and that DCHA cannot terminate a participant (as opposed to an "applicant") family from the HCVP for failing to place a transfer voucher before it expires.

[3] Peter Tatian, Josh Leopold, et al., Affordable Housing Needs Assessment for the District of Columbia, Phase II, An Urban Institute Research Report (May 2015) at 2, Appendix A, Table A21.

Proposed policy:

A family shall be granted an extension of time to search for housing with a voucher if the family shows good cause which may include but is not limited to the following:

1. The family needs a reasonable accommodation;
2. The family was discriminated against during its search for housing. Discrimination shall include source of income discrimination, race discrimination, failure to provide language access, or any other type of discrimination covered by the DC Human Rights Act and/or the federal Fair Housing Act;
3. The family needs to find a unit with three or more bedrooms, which are in short supply in the District;
4. A member of the family experienced domestic violence during the voucher term, or the family's search for housing is restricted to or from certain areas as a result of current or past domestic violence;
5. A family is restricted to or prohibited from living in certain areas due to involvement in a court case or as a result of a Court Order.
6. The family is limited to looking for housing in a particular geographic location due to proximity to an employer or a school or child care facility in which a member of the family is currently enrolled;
7. The family searched for, but was unable to locate a safe and habitable unit to apply for;
8. The family's inability to afford application fees, other fees, or security deposits impacted its ability to apply for or obtain a unit;
9. A delay by the landlord or DCHA resulted in the family losing access to a unit;
10. The family applied for, but was denied units for any other reason (e.g. due to credit score, eviction, or criminal history).