

Washington, DC shelter residents speak on living conditions

Our correspondents

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A meeting was convened February 28 by the Council of the District of Columbia to address conditions facing the nearly 1,000 homeless being housed at D.C. General Hospital, which closed as a medical facility in 2001. The hearing, an obvious attempt at damage control, had been scheduled after it was reported early last month that nearly 600 children were being housed in the facility, often in unsanitary conditions.

The number of homeless families in the District has skyrocketed by 74 percent since the onset of the financial meltdown of 2008. Of the roughly 12,000 homeless individuals in D.C., 3,340 are children. Poverty continues to tighten its grip on the nation's capital, with an estimated 20 percent of D.C. residents and 33 percent of children living under the poverty line. These conditions are being used as a pretext to criminalize many struggling families, with reports of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) witch-hunting parents who attempt to use the shelter system. (See: "Homelessness, social misery on the rise in US capital")

From the outset, the council hearing took the form of a sham, with speakers required to sign up online nearly a week prior. To further frustrate residents, on the day of the event the hospital was sectioned off by dozens of armed police. Under these circumstances, many people who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters said that they had been denied access to their own living quarters while the hearing was occurring.

Another example of the indifference to the conditions faced by the population was on display when many observers and residents were denied access to the meeting hall, having been informed at the last minute that the time had been changed and the event was full to capacity.

The hearing itself consisted of testimony made by

numerous residents of the shelter. Residents spoke out on the difficulty of transitioning out of the shelter to affordable housing, the dismal conditions faced in the shelter, and the experiences that had propelled them into homelessness. Many residents referred the contradictory maze of housing programs and the bureaucratic restrictions that exist, making it difficult to receive housing assistance in the District.

One such resident, Ms. Arleja Stephens, spoke about how her former residence, a private apartment, had been condemned by the city, forcing her into homelessness. She applied to live at D.C. General, but was informed that she "technically" still had shelter. Ms. Stephens mentioned that it is "very hard to find affordable housing in the District," and that a rent supplement she received from the city would only cover apartments that were close to \$1,000 a month. Although she was able to find more affordable apartments in the city, none of them were supported by the supplement she received.

All who testified spoke about the living situation faced at the shelter. Problems included a lice outbreak, electricity and water outages, untreated medical problems, and overcrowding. D.C. General staff informed the WSWS that the average stay at the facility per resident was roughly three months, although many had been there longer.

William Alston-El, a painter who has been homeless for several years, referred to the hearing as a "political ploy," meant to garner support for D.C. Council member Jim Graham after a string of recent embarrassments, including his censure for attempting to manipulate a D.C. lottery contract four years ago.

"Homelessness is the biggest thing in this city. It has been since I grew up in the 50s," Alston-El remarked. "These people act like they weren't aware of this issue

until now.” Referring to the council’s attempt to keep people out of the hearing due to a supposed fire hazard risk, he stated, “They have nearly 1,000 people crammed into this building; this entire place is a fire hazard.”

Alston-El produced several printed documents from a Department of Housing web site, detailing hundreds of vacant or soon to be torn down apartment buildings in the city. “Sometimes I think [the city government] would rather have rats and raccoons living in these buildings than people,” he said.

Referring to the sequester that would go into effect the next day, affecting budgets for social programs, Alston-El said he believed that D.C. officials were counting on such an event so they could seize the opportunity to claim that the city’s reported \$417 million budget surplus would be “better spent somewhere else.” “It’s fear mongering,” he said, “just like the ‘war on terror,’ the government has an interest in keeping people afraid so it can have more control to do as it wishes.”

Giving a sense of the social misery existing in the city, Alston-El spoke about the nearby Barry Farms, a government housing project set to be torn down. “The NSA [National Security Agency] has a new headquarters it would like to have built nearby. It can’t have that with a project housing building standing next to it, it’s seen as a blight,” he said, so the answer was to tear it down.

The mass exodus of people forced to leave D.C. would simply add to the impoverished numbers in nearby Prince George’s County, Maryland, which Alston-El referred to as “D.C.’s 9th Ward” due to its being the destination of many of those forcibly removed due to the District’s gentrifying policies.

Kevin Watts, a father of five, had come to speak at the hearing to relay some of the difficulties he experienced finding shelter. Watts, a part-time seasonal worker, explained the hurdles D.C. General Hospital made one go through in order to obtain housing. He said it placed his family in danger as well as threatened his job security, as the requirements took him away from his other responsibilities for long periods of time.

Watts was relocated to one of the hotels suited to receive the shelter’s overflow, yet “It took a fight to get in.” He also commented on the Dickensian conditions at D.C. General Hospital, saying, “You’ve

got kids with bed bug bites, no running water in some of the units, and mice running around.”

DeMarkaus, a single father, has been staying at the hospital shelter for nearly a year as he waits for his turn to get subsidized housing benefits. Characterizing the hearing as a public relations stunt, he explained that the day before, “They cleaned this building top to bottom. I’ve never seen this building as clean as it is; I’ve never seen these sidewalks without trash on them.” DeMarkaus added, “It’s all damage control and propaganda. Nothing will change after they leave.”

Several residents showed illusions in the role of the Democratic Party, believing it to be a matter of electing “the right guy” who would then turn things around. One WSWs reporter, contrasting the situation in D.C. General to the financial crisis of 2008, said, “The Democrats had no qualms about responding to the request by the banks for billions of dollars, even as poverty throughout the US continued to rise.”

One resident, Reginald Ogburn, responded, “You’ve got a point. People are being turned out of their homes even more so under Obama. The government completely forgot what the word ‘help’ means.”



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