Homeless population in US capital up 135 percent from last year

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The number of homeless families seeking shelter in the Washington, DC has risen by 135 percent from the same time last year, surging past earlier official expectations of a 10 percent increase, according to various news sources. The growing rate of homeless families seeking shelter is almost unprecedented, bringing the entire family shelter system to maximum capacity by late January.

Nearly 300 individuals fill DC General, a former hospital-turned-family shelter, with another 125 families filling up the District's only other family shelter. In fact, the city has had to put an additional 436 families with a combined 849 children in motels in the District and in the neighboring Maryland suburbs. The epidemic has been termed "a crisis" by the District's director of the Department of Human Services (DHS), David Berns.

At a February 3 public hearing at the former hospital, shelter residents blasted the city government for the abysmal conditions in which they were living. The hearing was attended by Council member Jim Graham, who chairs the Committee on Human Services. One complaint was raised in regard to a pile of dirty diapers that had been allowed to accumulate next to the cafeteria, where residents took their meals.

Washington, DC is one of the few cities in the US with a "right to shelter" law that goes into effect every winter when the temperatures reach dangerously cold levels. With the recent cold snap in January, homeless families from the District have come to rely on the law to protect them from the threat of deadly hypothermia.

Democratic Mayor Vincent Gray has attributed the rise in homelessness to non-residents flocking to the District with intent to "take advantage" of the law. This is an attempt to deflect attention away from the city's miserly allocation of resources for dealing with the victims of the social catastrophe wrought by gentrification, budget cuts, and a general decline in the living standards of the city population.

The current crisis fully exposes the social reality of the Washington Metropolitan region, often cited by pundits and politicians as having a "recession-proof" economy. According to the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI), the District has shed over 50 percent of its low-cost rental units and 72 percent of its low-value homes. In addition to that, 40 percent of DC households have not seen their incomes increase since 2000.

As in many other cities throughout the US, official responses to the decline in living standards have been limited to populist calls to raise the minimum wage. In the case of DC, last December saw the DC Council vote unanimously to raise the minimum wage from $8.25 an hour to $11.50 over the next three years. This was after an earlier attempt to raise the minimum wage to $12.50 was vetoed by Gray last summer.

At $11.50 an hour, a full-time worker would see a yearly income of $22,080 before taxes. A report put out by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found that a family of four would need a combined income of $88,000 yearly to live decently in the District of Columbia.

For the top layers of DC, business has been brisk. According to a report by the *Wall Street Journal*, government spending on local contractors went from $29.3 billion a year in 2000 to $83.5 billion a year in 2010. In 2013 the sale of million-dollar homes went up by 32 percent over 2012. In 2013, Market Watch rated the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria area the second richest region in the US, with a median household income of $88,223. The District has a city budget surplus of $1.75 billion.

Gray, who is running for re-election as mayor, first won office in 2010 by making appeals to the city's homeless advocates with pledges of support, but it was not long after winning office that he began to hatch proposals to defund essential social services, which he contemptuously refers to as the District's "handout" culture.

During his tenure, Gray and the DC Council have cut $20 million from a trust fund for affordable housing units and imposed stricter measures on the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Act in the name of fiscal responsibility. Last year, on the local level, nonprofits saw their funding for homeless prevention and family counseling cut by as much as 18 percent, in addition to the loss of federal homeless prevention grants as a result of the sequester.

DHS Director David Berns has stated that without additional funding, he may need to close shelters for homeless singles in order to shift resources to caring for families.

City officials have offered up the "Rapid Rehousing" program as a solution to the crisis. Under Rapid Rehousing, sheltered families agree to sign an apartment lease for which the city government will pay the first four months of rent, with an additional two years of possible extensions. The program is being presented as a means of clearing families out of overflowing shelters in order to make space for others in need.

Yet, according to the *Washington Post*, the absence of affordable housing is bottlenecking Rapid Rehousing. Whereas official predictions put the monthly number of families relocated with the program at 60, the actual numbers are 27 to 35. This is because many sheltered families are resisting the city's efforts to put them into the program. According to one sheltered resident interviewed by the *Post*, Cartrice Haynesworth, "A lot of families that tried Rapid Rehousing are back at DC General, so families are afraid to try it." Another resident who testified at the February 3 hearing called it "a revolving door of homelessness."

In pushing for Rapid Rehousing, DC officials seek to claw back even more savings by eliminating more costly programs like permanent subsidy vouchers or rent-controlled public housing units. To highlight this, Gray recently amended a law that would allow officials to kick out sheltered families who have refused at least two Rapid Rehousing offers.