

Washington, DC mayor seeks restrictions on homeless access to city shelters

Alex Gonzalez**24 December 2016**

Washington DC's Democratic Party Mayor Muriel Bowser is seeking enactment of a bill that would increase screening requirements for homeless people using the city's shelters. Mayor Bowser, who campaigned on the issue of eliminating homelessness in the city two years ago, is now pushing to bar the city's most vulnerable from receiving shelter if they cannot prove that they are DC residents.

"We have an obligation to serve our residents. But we cannot serve the entire region," declared Bowser at a legislative hearing of the DC Council late last month. "We're serving everybody else's residents. We can't serve our own. Our own residents are standing at the back of the line."

Bowser plans to exclude from District services all but the "deserving" poor are contemptible. The bill would force those seeking admission to a DC shelter to establish proof of residence by providing at least two out of thirteen legal, financial, or governmental documents such as evidence the individual or family has applied for public assistance, proof that a child is attending school in the District, a utility bill or a pay stub.

In cases of severe weather, individuals and families can be granted a three-day grace period, after which, if they fail to provide "clear and convincing evidence" of District residency, they can be cast out and denied further entry. If the District's social workers and shelter staff learn of new information that may affect an individual's eligibility, the latter's status can be "reassessed" and their access revoked. The Washington DC Council is expected to vote on the proposal early next year coinciding with the onset of the coldest part of winter when shelter for children and families is most needed.

The new rules would place an addition burden on

desperate families and individuals seeking assistance. The District is one of the few jurisdictions, along with New York City and the state of Massachusetts, that legally mandates the right to emergency shelter. Bowser's proposal is an attack both on homeless people and the city of DC population at large. According to the DC Department of Human Services (DHS), 12 percent of those seeking family shelter are not DC residents, although it is not clear how this figure was calculated. The DHS also claims the city spends more than \$80,000 a night on motel rooms for the homeless when the city's shelters reach full capacity.

Homelessness in the Washington DC region has reached record highs in recent years. According to an annual survey conducted by the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), there were more than 8,300 homeless individuals in Washington DC in January of this year—a spike of 14 percent from 2015.

A report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors released earlier this month found that the homelessness rate in Washington DC increased by over 34 percent between 2009 and 2016, a period corresponding to Obama's supposed "economic recovery."

The epidemic of homelessness in the city has fallen the hardest on families with children. While the number of homeless individuals declined by 4 percent, the number of homeless families and children increased by a staggering 30 percent in a single year. For the first time since 2001, homeless children and their parents (4,667) in the District outnumbered homeless single adults (3,683).

Housing is the dominant concern among low-income DC residents, according to a three-and-a-half year study conducted by the D.C. Consortium of Legal Service

Providers. Among the 600 residents surveyed and 130 individuals interviewed, lack of affordable housing and fear of homelessness were cited as the most serious problems they faced in the past two years. When asked what type of services people in their community needed the most, almost 40 percent said “housing.”

The crisis in homelessness is closely tied to a shortage of affordable homes in one of the nation’s most expensive housing markets. According to the Urban Institute, the number of rentals available for under \$800 a month fell by 91 percent from 2005 to 2012. Meanwhile, the number of apartments renting for at least \$1,000 a month shot up by 92 percent during the same time period.

A report from the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI) noted the number of low-cost units has decreased by half since 2002, with DC’s lowest income households—including one-fifth of all children in the District—devoting at least half of their income to rent.

Assisted housing programs, which can often provide much needed support for working families, have also been under-provided and underfunded. This year, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that close to 7,000 DC families live in public housing and 10,500 receive federal housing vouchers. However, there are 41,000 households currently on a waiting list for a voucher or public housing.

The District of Columbia Housing Authority closed the waiting list in April of 2013, with more than five times more families on the waiting list than the number of available vouchers. It is unknown when the waiting list will open again, let alone when families can expect to obtain public housing.

While housing prices have soared, wages have remained flat, and the gap between the richest and the poorest in the nation’s capital has continued to widen. A study by the DCFPI found that in 2014, Washington DC had the fourth highest level of income inequality in the country, with the top 5 percent of households earning 54 times the income of the bottom 20 percent.

Washington DC has been under the control of the Democratic Party since 1967. Muriel Bowser, who declared during her campaign for DC mayor in 2014, “My administration is committed to tackling homelessness head-on... We will end family homelessness in the District by 2018,” has only funded 15 percent of what is needed to implement just the

second year of her proposal. In addition, the mayor has instructed police and city agencies to forcibly shut down every homeless encampment in the city, according to the *Huffington Post*.

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