





# Jaffe Report: Erratic Policy Threatens Homeless Families as Cold Sets In

#### By Harry Jaffe

Published at 1:11 PM EST on Dec 16, 2016 | Updated at 4:33 PM EST on Dec 17, 2016





A homeless woman tires to keep warm near a steam grate on Constitution Avenue just before the historic blizzard in January 2016. D.C. has the highest homelessness rate among 38 major cities, according to new information from the U.S. Conference of Mayors. (Photo by Win McNamee/Getty

Harry Jaffe, a longtime chronicler of the people and politics of Washington, D.C., writes a column for NBC Washington's First Read DMV blog.

Brace yourselves. This winter could be the roughest in memory, especially for the District's increasing number of homeless families.

The deadly trio of Artic cold, homeless kids and erratic politicians is upon us.

"Tragedy is lurking right around the corner," said Patty Fugere. She's been directing the Legal Clinic for the Homeless since 1991. "The system needs to be putting out the welcome mat rather than slamming the front door."

Fugere and other advocates for the homeless believe that Mayor Muriel Bowser's ımilies in genuine need.

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Mayors. That followed recent federal statistics that count 8,300 homeless people in the District.

The worrisome news comes as no surprise to those in the business of helping shelter our homeless families. What surprises me is this: knowing the polar vortex was going to meet the homeless surge, why have our political leaders failed to figure out how to place people in safe, more permanent housing?

I'm not talking here just about homeless individuals we see wrapped up in blankets in doorways and steaming grates. The more endemic problem is families with little children wandering the streets after dark.

Mayor Muriel Bowser came into office with big promises to end homelessness by 2020. A worthy goal. Yet as we face the first frigid nights that could kill a kid sleeping in the open, the number of families without shelter has risen. Meanwhile, the number of homeless is dropping in suburban counties, according to the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

#### What gives?

I asked the Bowser administration for comment. Department of Human Services director Laura Green Zeilinger responded. "Families have access to safe shelter in the winter," she said, "and when they have a housing emergency no matter the temperature outside."

When Bowser introduced the new residency rules in November, she told Council, "We have an obligation to serve our residents, but we cannot serve the entire region. We're serving everybody else's residents. We can't serve our own. Our own residents are at the back of the line."

Remember, the District is one of only three jurisdictions in the nation with a "right to shelter" law. New York city and Massachusetts have similar laws. That bighearted approach creates a heavy burden.

And I believe Zeilinger is the ideal person to realize the mayor's promise. She ran former Mayor Adrian Fenty's "housing first" homeless initiative. She then directed the U.S. Interagency Council on the Homelessness.

"We have spent the last two years in full reform of our system to care for the homeless," she tells me. "We have helped families enter permanent housing."

Jean-Michel Giraud, president of Friendship Place, says Zeilinger is "a great leader and problem solver."

Agreed, but Zeilinger was by Bowser's side as the mayor lurched from one extreme to another.

Expectations ran high after the mayor promised to house all the homeless, starting with veterans in 2015. Then she promised to close DC General, the former public hospital that now warehouses 260 homeless families. Higher still.

Advocates for the homeless thrilled when she opened the door to family shelters

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She rolled out a cockamamie plan early last year to empty DC General. The city would pay developers to build small shelters on private property in all eight of the city's wards. The city would then lease the shelters at substantial gain for the builders - some of whom contributed handsomely to Bowser's mayoral campaign.

Bowser neglected to involve neighbors in siting the shelters. They howled. She neglected to cost out the plan, which turned out to be exorbitant. When the council chucked her proposal, Bowser dropped the f-bomb on Chairman Phil Mendelson in public. The council passed a sensible compromise but will take years to execute and put off the closing of DC General until 2020.

Then the mayor dropped another bomb on the homeless: Families are already required to prove residency. Bowser would tighten them. Her law would require two documents to prove residency, such as pay stubs or utility bills. Both can be hard to produce. Social workers would verify the need for emergency shelter and could disqualify applicants on the spot.

"It's a very rigorous process," says Patty Fugere. "Families moving from place to place have a hard time providing clear and convincing evidence. It can force mothers to ride the bus all night with their children or sleep in the corner of a laundromat."

Does the District turn away families in need?

"Absolutely not," says Laura Zeilinger.

Seven families called the Shelter Hotline (202/399-7093) Wednesday night seeking emergency shelter, according to the Department of Human Services. The city took in three families and found "other safe housing options" for the other four.

The only thing Bowser's people and advocates for the homeless can agree on is that the District needs more affordable housing. That's cold comfort, literally, to families who cannot afford housing on a freezing night.

I managed to find some relief from the looming tragedy.

At the stroke of midnight Thursday, with the wind chill below 10 degrees, 50 homeless women were sleeping on cots on the basketball court of the Sherwood Recreation Center between Capital Hill and H Street, NE. Catholic Charities runs the pop up shelter for the city. Melvin Smith, who checks on emergency shelters all night for the Department of Lluman Consider autuma by an his tour

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And nonprofits like Thrive DC and Friendship Place are having success at placing homeless folks in permanent homes.

Friendship Place, for example, has secured permanent housing for 81 households that included 135 individuals with 44 children. It has also housed and helped stabilize 217 formerly homeless men and women. That might not sound like huge number, but each one is a life saved from dying in the cold.

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"I would encourage the city to look at Employment First more," he says. "What we need is job placement."

What Mayor Bowser needs is to quit making promises to end homelessness, set and stick to a clear path, and make sure her residency requirements don't leave a family freezing on the streets. "I think homelessness doesn't know jurisdictions," at-large Council Member Robert White told the Washington Post when Bowser suggested her new rules.

Especially when families need shelter on a deathly cold night.

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