

Testimony of Jean-Michel Giraud, President & CEO,
Friendship Place
before the District of Columbia Committee on Housing & Neighborhood Revitalization
on the Eviction with Dignity Act of 2018
September 24, 2018

Good morning, Chairwoman Bonds and Members of the Committee and thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify; I am Jean-Michel Giraud, the President & CEO of Friendship Place and a former member of the District's Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Friendship Place is a regional homeless-services provider serving over 3,700 persons with street outreach, hospitality, case management, youth services, medical and psychiatric services, shelter, prevention, rapid rehousing and permanent housing in Washington; and with job placement and veterans services in the greater DC Metropolitan Area. We also have a national reach through best practices.

Friendship Place is a unique blend of public-private partnerships that allows us to have a lasting impact on homelessness by developing practical, permanent solutions. We seek to empower people to rebuild their lives and are working to end homelessness in Washington, DC.

We value our partnership with the City and within this framework, we would like to offer feedback and suggestions to enhance the current conditions for people experiencing evictions in Washington.

1. We are pleased to see that the City is attempting to enhance safety guards around evictions and to modify the process to remove some of the negative impact on Washingtonians experiencing them. Namely, we feel that the lock-out period allows tenants additional time to safeguard their belongings. This is a noticeable improvement on the old process which too often resulted in belongings being deposited on the sidewalk where passers-by could help themselves to them. We feel that the period of time given the tenants to claim their belongings could be

longer in order to avoid a total loss of household items. People who have limited resources may not be able to access the help they need in the time period indicated in order to move and safely store their belongings. We feel that a period of 20 days would be more appropriate in this case.

2. While we realize that the belongings are lost through this process, we feel that giving landlords the option to remove or sell them might be a positive step in the long-term. Applying the proceeds of the sale to the tenant's debt potentially helps both the tenant and the landlord. However, the guidelines around the circumstances of the sale of these items and the reporting mechanisms seem unclear. We feel that it might be good to more clearly define how the landlord is required to record the amounts gained through the sale of such items and to share this information with the tenant.
3. Evictions or lock-outs can be extremely stressful situations for people experiencing them. Our participants have shared with us the trauma they and their household members experienced during similar processes in the past. We are recommending that the City require staff performing evictions or lock-outs to receive specialized training in order to facilitate these with an optimal level of sensitivity. We also feel that a designated staff member should offer household members information on available resources like shelter and other basic services as needed. We believe that this investment will help tenants go through these challenging processes with more dignity and gain an understanding of the resources available to them. We also feel that better interactions with tenants will lower the risk of crisis and violence on site.
4. Because the high stress level during these proceedings, we would also like trained staff to be able to deescalate situations and to remind people to take their important items with them like medications, identifications, and valuables. We believe that a more caring approach during these times would greatly improve the experience on the tenants' part. Conversations about important belongings would also help avoid the possible loss of life-sustaining items like medications or legal documents like IDs.

5. Finally, we are asking that the allotted amount from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program increase from \$900 to \$1,350 to keep up with increasing rental costs in the District. We feel that this preventive measure will help many households avoid evictions.
6. When possible, we recommend that landlords and tenants agree on an alternative payment arrangement to the one stipulated in the lease, particularly in temporary hardship situations. We are also suggesting that landlords show flexibility and let tenants out of their leases before back-due rent accumulates. Finally, we recommend mediation services so the two parties may reach an agreement out of court. While there are court-referred and tenant-landlord based mediation services, there are also free community mediation services such as Community Mediation DC (<https://communitymediationdc.org/>) that could be used in situations like these. The mediation team would help facilitate communication in a calm way while the two sides reached an agreement. This service is not linked to the DC court system but the court can recognize the agreement as valid.

Again, we would like to commend the City on its efforts to make these very difficult processes better for Washingtonians experiencing them and respectfully offer our feedback and suggestions to further enhance the process.