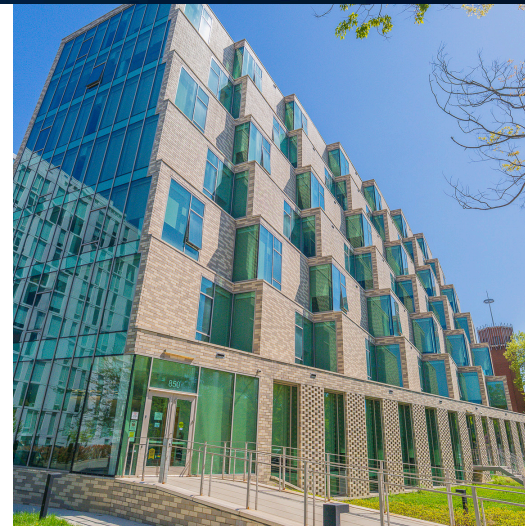


Activating Bold Change in Washington, D.C.

by Dr. Antonio Oftelie
and David Tannenwald



LEADERSHIP FOR A
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In November 2024, Laura Zeilinger, director of Washington, D.C.'s Department of Human Services (DHS), was beaming as she stood behind Mayor Muriel Bowser at a ribbon cutting ceremony for The Aston—the District's first non-congregate shelter for adults experiencing homelessness. (The Aston was a non-congregate shelter because people had access to semi-private rooms.¹) Zeilinger had recently announced that she was stepping down at the end of the year, and the mayor was using the last ribbon cutting event of Zeilinger's decade-long tenure to extol her leadership in helping the District transform its approach to homelessness. As Bowser recalled,

Zeilinger had “asked me to do some things early on that I just wasn't quite sure would work, but she laid it out, we made the investments, and they have indeed worked.” “I'm just deeply proud,” the mayor added, “of Laura and her team for their leadership.” Later, Zeilinger took the podium and underscored the city's progress, which included a 27.5 percent drop in homelessness and the creation of a new, collaborative ecosystem that enhanced prevention, crisis response, and long-term support to achieve new outcomes for children and families. “We can only do great, big, bold things,” she emphasized, “when we do them together.”²

- 1 Sophie Rosenthal and Rafael Sanchez-Cruz, “DC transforms old college dorms into transitional shelter for adults facing homelessness,” WUSA9, November 26, 2024, available at <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/local/housing/new-shelter-non-congregate-living-dc/65-00cd5edc-3d7c-4794-8bbc-0b2258d84392> (accessed on October 1, 2025).
- 2 “Mayor Bowser Celebrates the Opening of The Aston,” Muriel Bowser, Mayor, Government of The District of Columbia, November 25, 2024, available at <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-celebrates-opening-aston> (accessed on January 9, 2025); Mark Segraves, “DC's director of human services stepping down,” NBC Washington, November 1, 2024, available at <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/dcs-director-of-human-services-stepping-down/3756638/> (accessed on January 9, 2025); and “Mayor Bowser Celebrates the Opening of the Aston, 11/25/24,” DC Mayor's Office, YouTube, November 25, 2024, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4JN9NRV7aU> (accessed on January 9, 2025).

This case was developed by Dr. Antonio M. Ofelie and David Tannenwald. Funding for the development of this case was provided by Leadership for a Networked World and the Kresge Foundation. The case study is developed solely as the basis for learning and discussion and is not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management. Copyright © 2026 by Leadership for a Networked World. To request permission to reproduce this case study please contact email@lnwprogram.org. This publication may not be reproduced without the permission of Leadership for a Networked World.

It was not always so good. Washington, D.C. had a history of challenges. In 2009, Banita Jacks had experienced a series of mental health, economic, and social challenges culminating in the gruesome murder of her four daughters (the girls' corpses had decomposed in their home for months). While the Jacks incident was the worst possible outcome, it was emblematic of a human services system that had an array of failure points. Multiple government agencies and non-profits had been in contact with the family shortly before the girls were killed. If these groups had collaborated, they might have noticed the signs of trouble and proactively helped the family. Yet as *The New York Times* pointed out, the human services organizations had worked in silos, meaning there had been “no integrated structures or services...in place to share information and enable a coordinated response.”³ In 2014, Relisha Rudd, an eight-year-old girl, had disappeared from D.C. General (a homeless shelter with approximately 600 children), and it took nearly three weeks for authorities to notice she was missing. (A decade later, she still had not been found.) “That really woke the conscience of our community,” Zeilinger reflected, “to the conditions in which we were providing homeless services to families.” While running for mayor in 2014, Bowser had promised to close D.C. General, and she recruited Zeilinger to lead that effort. Zeilinger persuaded the mayor to not only close the shelter but also pursue a comprehensive strategy to combat family homelessness through systemic reform.⁴

The mayor supported the strategy, leading to a decade-long journey involving significant triumphs and challenges.

Along the way, Zeilinger had had to grapple with difficult questions. How would she create a vision with the mayor to pursue a multi-pronged strategy for reinventing the city's services? How would she help other stakeholders in the system believe in the possibility of transformation and make sense of the direction the District was heading? How would she overcome political resistance and build a collaborative effort? What organizational capabilities and cultural competencies would DHS need to develop? Once the department achieved its goal of closing D.C. General and setting up a more effective system, how could it sustain its momentum to build on these efforts and continue to pursue needed changes? How would she position DHS to succeed after she stepped down?

Overview of Washington, D.C. Department of Human Services

Washington, D.C. has a distinctive form of government for a major metropolitan area because the U.S. Constitution placed the District under Congress's jurisdiction. In 1973, the federal government passed the “District of Columbia Home Rule Act,” which allowed for the establishment of a local government. D.C. residents were empowered to vote for a mayor and a council. Although Congress retained the power to veto legislation and reviewed the District's budgets, the council would have the ability to set fiscal policy and create and oversee District government agencies.⁵ This led to the creation of a local government with dozens of agencies, over 36,000 employees, and a \$21 billion operating budget.⁶

3 Theo Emery, “Mother Guilty of Killing 4 Girls Whose Bodies Decomposed in Home,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2009, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/30/us/30mom.html> (accessed on January 9, 2025); and “The Human Services Value Curve: A Leadership Framework and Theory of Change for Health and Human Services Outcomes and Value,” *Leadership for a Networked World*, available at https://lnwprogram.org/sites/default/files/HSVC_Guide.pdf (accessed on March 4, 2025).

4 Ellie Silverman, “At age 8, Relisha vanished. A decade later, she haunts a changed city,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/03/03/relisha-rudd-missing-decade-dc-homeless/> (accessed on January 9, 2025); and Presentation by Laura Zeilinger, Rachel Pierre, Darrell Cason, Kia Williams, and Thomas Roberts, December 3, 2024. Hereafter cited as Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

5 “Frequently Asked Questions about Statehood for the People of DC,” State of Washington, DC, available at <https://statehood.dc.gov/page/faq#:~:text=The%20Constitution%20dictates%20that%20the,4%20million%20people%20and%20growing> (accessed on January 10, 2025); “Statement from Mayor Bowser on the 50th Anniversary of the DC Home Rule Act,” Executive Office of the Mayor, Government of The District of Columbia, December 22, 1973, available at <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/statement-mayor-bowser-50th-anniversary-dc-home-rule-act> (accessed on January 10, 2025); and “Government of Washington, D.C.,” *Britannica*, available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Washington-DC/Government> (accessed on January 10, 2025).

6 “Agency Directory,” available at <https://dc.gov/directory> (accessed on January 10, 2025); “Mayor Bowser Announces that All DC Government Employees Will Be Required to Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19,” Executive Office of the Mayor, Government of the District of Columbia, August 10, 2021, available at <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-all-dc-government-employees-will-be-required-get-vaccinated-against#:~:text=Approximately%2036%2C700%20people%20are%20employed,of%20the%20Chief%20Financial%20Officer> (accessed on January 10, 2025); and “Mayor Bowser Testifies in Support of Her Fiscal 2025 Budget, A Fair Shot: Strategic Investments and Shared Sacrifice,” Executive Office of the Mayor, Government of the District of Columbia, April 3, 2024, available at <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-testifies-support-her-fiscal-year-2025-budget-fair-shot-strategic-investments> (accessed on January 10, 2025).

In health and human services, some of the most important agencies included the Department of Behavioral Health, the Department of Health Care Finance, and DHS. DHS's mission was "to empower every District resident to reach their full potential by providing meaningful connections to work opportunities, economic assistance, and supportive services." The agency—which had a budget of \$933 million and approximately 1,500 personnel—pursued its objective by providing services through two main groups.⁷ The first was the Economic Security Administration, which determined eligibility for cash, food, childcare, and medical benefits and administered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as well as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The second was the Family Services Administration, which offered assistance to multiple high-need populations, such as people experiencing homelessness, low-income people, families experiencing crises, and "youth who are at-risk of court involvement, school disengagement, homelessness, and repeat teen pregnancy." In addition, DHS had a managerial team—including the director, a chief operating officer, a director of policy and program support, and a general counsel—that provided strategic direction and oversight.⁸

Since January 2015, DHS had been led by Zeilinger, a veteran government leader with a longstanding commitment to social justice. Her desire to help others stemmed in part from the influence of her parents, who instilled in her the Jewish concept of "tikkun olam," which means, as Zeilinger explained, "rebuilding the world." "For me," she added, "that's really about people in the amount of pain and suffering that there is out there in the world that is really unnecessary. So that's always been what drives me." This sense of mission manifested

itself early in Zeilinger's life when as a high school student in Ohio, she helped set up summer camps for inner-city youth experiencing poverty.⁹ It also continued in Zeilinger's professional career when after graduating from Sarah Lawrence College and Washington College of Law at American University, she worked in international economic development before shifting her focus to government. This included serving as former Washington, D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty's liaison to DHS and the Office of Disability Rights, deputy director for program operations for DHS, and the executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.¹⁰

Building A Path To New Outcomes

In November 2014, the day after Bowser was elected, one of her first calls was to Zeilinger, who initially thought it was a robocall and nearly hung up on the mayor-elect. However, once she realized the call was real, Zeilinger stayed on the line and soon agreed to take the role of leading DHS.¹¹ As Zeilinger recalled, the mayor asked her to close D.C. General, and she responded by proposing a strategy to not only close the shelter but also transform the District's approach to supporting families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. From Zeilinger's perspective, implementing this strategy was imperative because at the time, the District had a system that was designed to meet its legal mandate rather than respond to a family's needs. Specifically, District law stipulated that people had a right to access shelter during hypothermia alerts. This led to a dynamic where DHS would see spikes in shelter entries during the winter and spend the rest of the year trying to help families find a place to go before repeating the cycle. The problem was that cold weather was not what caused people to experience homelessness but instead

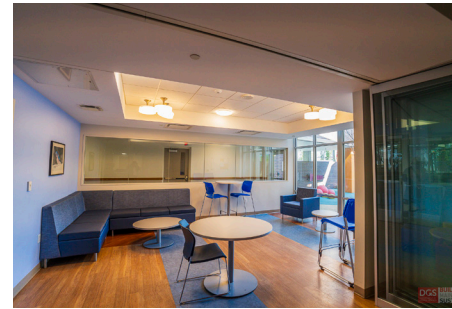
7 "Agency Directory," filtered by topic of health and human services, available at <https://dc.gov/directory?tid=55> (accessed on January 21, 2025); "Department of Human Services," CFO, Government of District of Columbia, available at https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/ja0_dhs_chapter_2025j.pdf (accessed on January 10, 2025); and "Laura Green Zeilinger, DHS," DC Workforce Investment Council, available at <https://dcworks.dc.gov/page/laura-green-zeilinger-dhs> (accessed on March 6, 2025).

8 "Organizational Chart," Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, June 2024, available at https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/publication/attachments/DHS%20Org%20Chart_%20June%202024.pdf (accessed on January 10, 2025); "Department of Human Services," CFO; and "2025 JAO Department of Human Services," Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://cfo.dc.gov/node/1651106> (accessed on January 10, 2025).

9 "Sounds From the Street: DHS Director Laura Zeilinger on Affordable Housing," Street Sense Media, available at <https://www.streetsensemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Sounds-From-the-Street-Laura-Zeilinger.pdf> (accessed on January 13, 2025); and Diane Herbst, "As director of Human Services in Washington, DC, Laura Green Zeilinger '95 changes lives by reducing homelessness," Sarah Lawrence College, available at <https://www.sarahlawrence.edu/magazine/democracy-education/alumni/on-the-job.html> (accessed on January 13, 2025).

10 "Laura Green Zeilinger, DHS," DC Workforce Investment Council.

11 "Mayor Bowser Celebrates the Opening of the Aston, 11/25/24," DC Mayor's Office, YouTube.



what made it more dangerous. As a result, if the District were simply to close D.C. General without implementing a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of homelessness, it would be the equivalent of, as Zeilinger said, “moving deck chairs on a sinking ship.”

Zeilinger proposed to the mayor a multifaceted strategy with several key components. First, the District would provide access to shelter year-round in policy though not in law. This was important in part to help families in crisis as well as reinforce a second facet of the plan: the launch of preventative services. As Zeilinger explained, people would only feel comfortable engaging with DHS on proactive steps if they trusted that there would be a system in place to support them in case those initial interventions were unsuccessful. Finally, the District would provide improved services in shelters to reduce the length of time that people spent there and help them transition to permanency more quickly. Summarizing the strategy, Zeilinger explained: “By opening up access year-round to shelter and being effective with prevention and reducing the length of time that families spend in shelter, we’re able to bring down family homelessness even while serving the same number of people at the time that they need it...”¹²

The mayor supported the more comprehensive plan. This was important in part because it signaled, as Zeilinger observed, “openness to shift thinking from a more discreet

objective to...really looking at the system as a whole.” In addition, Bowser’s backing allowed DHS to begin introducing changes, including making access to shelter available year-round. Finally, the mayor’s encouragement helped convene an array of government agencies and other stakeholders to pursue reform. This aided the creation of Homeward DC, a community strategic plan that was facilitated, written, and published by the District’s Interagency Council on Homelessness. Approved in March 2015, the plan outlined a vision to “make homelessness in the District...a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience” by pursuing many of the objectives Zeilinger had suggested to the mayor. These included “develop[ing] a more effective crisis response system,” “increas[ing] the supply of affordable and supportive housing,” and “increas[ing] prevention efforts to stabilize households before housing loss occurs.” What’s more, that the plan came together so quickly with support from diverse stakeholders illustrated the significance of Bowser’s sponsorship. Less than 100 days into the mayor’s term, the stage was set for systemic transformation.¹³

Swinging Into Action and Sustaining Support

Following the release of Homeward DC, Zeilinger and DHS swung into action to try to make their vision a reality. This included investing \$21 million in family system transformation and bringing the Virginia Williams

12 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

13 Ibid.; and Interview with Laura Zeilinger, December 4, 2024. Hereafter cited as Zeilinger interview.

Family Resource Center (VWFRC)—DHS’s intake office for residents seeking assistance—in house. As Zeilinger explained, VWFRC had previously been contracted out as part of DHS’s continuum of care. However, by bringing the group inside DHS, the agency was better positioned to respond to each family’s needs. This included referring families to partners co-located at VWFRC (e.g., the District Alliance for Safe Housing, which works with victims of domestic violence) as well as the Homelessness Prevention Program, which “prevents families at risk of becoming homeless from entering the shelter system...” To that end, the program—which was launched in September 2015—aimed to help families find stability within the community through their networks and provided “mediation services and flexible financial assistance.” This was significant because in the past VWFRC had only been able to help families at the point they ran out of all other options. In addition, it was emblematic of how DHS was transforming the District’s approach and introducing a more sophisticated way of working. (See Exhibit A for an overview of the “System of Care for Families” that Zeilinger and DHS established.) “We’re preventing homelessness more frequently by intervening early with families,” Zeilinger said, “with more effective solutions to a housing crisis to prevent an episode of homelessness and help them regain stability.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, even as DHS began to reorient the District’s system for supporting families, Zeilinger and her team encountered significant challenges. This included responding to prospective staff and other city leaders and partners who were skeptical of the viability of the director’s vision. In particular, many questioned the practicality of a year-round access policy; they feared it would lead to people without housing coming to Washington, D.C. and overwhelming the system. “There were a ton of naysayers,” recalled Zeilinger. She assuaged the concerns of critics by emphasizing aspects of the plan that were unobjectionable and underscoring the logic of her strategy. For instance, as Zeilinger said, “Nobody was going to say, ‘No, don’t do homeless prevention.’” In addition, as the director added, people could grasp that “weather doesn’t drive

homelessness” and the importance of having year-round access so that people would feel comfortable accepting other services. “People could wrap their head around,” Zeilinger said, “if you can’t get sheltered when you might need it, why would you accept something, some prevention services now and then not be able to get shelter if those don’t work out for you?”

Even so, the appetite for reform ultimately hinged on the strategy’s effectiveness, a point that came into sharp relief in 2016 when entries into shelters were still outpacing exits. At that point, the District was putting people in hotels in Maryland and Virginia, and the mayor expressed concerns to Zeilinger. “I think she was starting to have doubts,” the director reflected, “because it was what everyone thought it would be. If you offer a shelter to everybody who needs it, people are going to come from everywhere. ... It’s just not sustainable.” Zeilinger encouraged Bowser to hold course, and the District reached a tipping point in late 2016 when exits from shelter began to outpace entries, validating Zeilinger’s approach. “We had a lot of inflows, which we knew was going to happen at the beginning,” the director said, “that we were not going to outpace [exits], but we started to, and it was like, ‘Okay.’”¹⁵

Closing D.C. General

While the statistical evidence of the effectiveness of Zeilinger’s approach was a significant inflection point, the director and her team still had to overcome a number of obstacles. Chief among them was navigating the fraught process of shuttering D.C. General. This stemmed in part from the difficult history involving troubled shelters in the District. In 2007, then Mayor Adrian Fenty had announced plans to close D.C. Village, a former nursing home that had been converted into a shelter but was infested by mice and bedbugs and lacked proper food, heat, and air conditioning. “This is the premier example of how not to care for our homeless neighbors,” Fenty said at the time. “It’s not only inhumane but against best practices.”¹⁶ As Zeilinger recalled, the District found ways to house all of the families that had been at D.C. Village but did not

14 Presentation by Zeilinger et. al; “Eviction Prevention & Rental Assistance,” Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/eviction-prevention-rental-assistance> (accessed on January 22, 2025); and Lilah Burke, “Couchsurfing: The simple idea behind DC’s homelessness prevention program,” Greater Greater Washington, October 14, 2019, available at <https://gwwash.org/view/74250/couch-surfing-the-simple-idea-behind-dcs-homelessness-prevention-program#.XaSOo-dKhTY>” (accessed on January 22, 2025).

15 Zeilinger interview; and Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

16 Sylvia Moreno, “District Closing ‘Inhumane’ D.C. Village,” The Washington Post, October 23, 2007, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/22/AR2007102202211.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_96 (accessed on January 23, 2025).

create alternative shelter spaces. “We thought if we just kept investing in what people need to exit,” Zeilinger said, “that we would be able keep the length of stay down, and we would be able to work within our system. We did not have an understanding of the degree to which we really had to have an adequate supply of shelter available.”¹⁷

This precipitated the crisis the District was confronting with D.C. General. Located in a former hospital, the facility—which the District had begun using as a temporary shelter in 2001—was beset by spiders and other pests that bit residents, sometimes lacked heat and hot water, and had staff who were accused of sexually assaulting residents.¹⁸ What’s more, the security precautions that were taken after Rudd disappeared added to the indignities residents experienced. As Zeilinger recalled, there were over 70 families in a single corridor sharing congregate showers and bathrooms, and if a child had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, their parent had to wake up the whole family and take them with them because they were not allowed to leave children in a room alone. In addition, to enter the shelter, a family had to go through metal detectors, and a staff member had to unlock the door to their room. “The measures that you needed to put in place there to keep children safe,” Zeilinger lamented, “made families feel like they were incarcerated. ... There was nothing that we were going to do in that environment to make it better.”¹⁹ The problems at D.C. General had serious implications for Zeilinger’s strategy to transform the system, which was predicated on ensuring people had access to shelter if they needed it but also helping them exit to permanency quickly. D.C. General lacked the requisite supports to make that possible, so if the District could not find an effective alternative, Zeilinger’s overarching strategy would not succeed. “As a community,” Zeilinger wrote in a blog post, “I know we all share in the vision

and responsibility to finally serve families experiencing homelessness in an environment designed to support them and help them thrive.”²⁰

Recognizing the urgency of closing D.C. General and replacing it with a better alternative, Zeilinger and the mayor worked closely to develop a strategy as part of their broader efforts to transform the District’s approach to homelessness. This began in September 2015 when the District’s Interagency Council on Homelessness convened a “Design Principles Work Group” “to provide input and feedback to the Mayor on design guidelines for replacement units for the DC General Family Shelter.” Blending their expertise in (among areas) client service, facility design, and childhood development, the work group members examined best practices in other jurisdictions and considered how to make the system more efficient (particularly by reducing the length of stay) and dignified. This included exploring topics ranging from bathroom design to dining, study, and recreation spaces to how to ensure adequate privacy and safety and avoid re-traumatization (especially for domestic violence survivors). “We did a lot of work on design requirements,” Zeilinger reflected, “really centering that with the voices of families from our system. What does it mean to feel safe? What are the attributes of place?”²¹

This set the stage for the mayor to unveil a strategy in February 2016 to site Short-Term Family Housing facilities in all of the District’s eight wards.²² Each location would accommodate up to 50 families (a far cry from the 280 families at D.C. General) and offer private rooms, have no more than ten families on a floor, and provide at least one bathroom for every two families. The bathrooms would be inside families’ rooms or right next door to avoid the kinds of long treks that had been necessary at D.C. General. What’s more, the hallways would have clear sightlines,

17 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

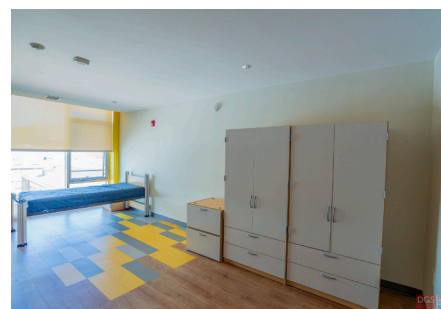
18 Justin Jouvenal, Robert Samuels, and DeNeen L. Brown, “D.C. family homeless shelter beset by dysfunction, decay,” *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2014, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-family-homeless-shelter-beset-by-dysfunction-decay/2014/07/12/3bbb7f50-f739-11e3-a3a5-42be35962a52_story.html (accessed on January 23, 2025).

19 Presentation by Zeilinger et al; Katie Shepherd, “Delays Persist in Shuttering D.C. Homeless Shelter That Few Consider Livable,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2016, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/us/dc-general-homeless-shelter-washington.html> (accessed on January 24, 2025); and Zeilinger interview.

20 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; and Laura Green Zeilinger, “Three Years of Progress in Reforming DC’s Family Homeless Services System,” Medium, July 16, 2018, available at <https://medium.com/@DCHumanServ/three-years-of-progress-in-reforming-dcs-family-homeless-services-system-140ac4d08fc2> (accessed on January 23, 2025).

21 “District of Columbia Interagency Council on Homelessness Design Principles for DC General Replacement Units,” September 30, 2015, available at https://ich.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ich/page_content/attachments/Design%20Guidelines%20Meeting%20PPT%20Sept%2030.pdf (accessed on January 23, 2025); and Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

22 One of the facilities was for women without children. Julie Zauzmer Weil, “The pandemic helped D.C. slash family homelessness. But a new crisis looms,” *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2021, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-family-homeless/2021/03/13/41c74204-4b9b-11eb-a9f4-0e668b9772ba_story.html (accessed on March 4, 2025).



there would be spaces where children could play and study, and there would be services that employed a whole family/two-generation approach. These supports would include case managers, housing navigators, employment education specialists, on-site healthcare, trauma-informed coaching, coordination with schools, integration with TANF, and linkages to other community programs. Using these services, DHS would target the length of stay at under 90 days per family. This timeframe represented another departure from D.C. General (where each family typically stayed for over a year); it was also imperative to help families reach permanency more quickly and enable DHS to serve more people in need. To enhance its ability to achieve these objectives, DHS would transition from relying on a management organization to oversee shelter services to taking direct oversight of Short-Term Family Housing contracts. This would allow DHS to collaborate with Short-Term Family Housing programs when implementing the new model. For example, DHS could conduct case reviews with shelter case managers to help families progress and address challenges that might have otherwise led to longer lengths of stay. Taken together, the Short-Term Family Housing model was an innovative approach that would ensure that families were treated with dignity and at the same time create a cost-effective system that could help as many people as possible.²³

Beyond the design of Short-Term Family Housing, the mayor and Zeilinger gave careful thought to how to maximize the likelihood that the plan would succeed. To some extent, this hinged on having a facility in each of the District’s eight wards and rolling out all of the locations simultaneously. This functioned as a way to blunt potential political opposition because as Zeilinger explained, even if a councilmember had constituents who did not want to have Short-Term Family Housing in their area, there was consensus that the District needed to replace D.C. General. “Everything was going to move together,” added Jenna Grant Cevasco, the Deputy Administrator for Permanent Housing at DHS, “and we were all going to be on the same page.” In addition, the mayor and DHS did extensive community outreach. This included establishing an advisory committee in every ward with representatives from community organizations. The advisory committees provided input on the design of the building (e.g., the color or landscaping so that the facility would blend in with the neighborhood), which helped to create a sense of ownership. Each advisory committee also established a good neighbor protocol, which laid out what DHS was going to do as well as the expectations for neighbors and identified a contact person at DHS in case problems arose. Finally, DHS devoted significant time to attending meetings of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions

23 “Ending Homelessness in the District: A Plan to Close DC General,” Muriel Bowser, Mayor, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://mayor.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/publication/attachments/Ending-Homelessness-in-DC.pdf> (accessed on January 23, 2025); Presentation by Zeilinger et al; and Personal communication by email with Laura Zeilinger, May 28, 2025.

(these were hyperlocal governing bodies with elected representatives). This helped to dispel fallacies, such as that people in the facilities would be single drug addicts as opposed to families seeking help finding employment and getting their kids enrolled in school. “I think a lot of the myths around what’s going to happen are myths,” explained Cevasco, who had previously served as program manager for Short-Term Family Housing, “but I think that helps bring people along.”²⁴

In addition to astute decision-making and extensive community engagement, the effort to launch Short-Term Family Housing benefited from a broader sense of mission. The day before the first community meetings, Zeilinger led a large training with approximately 50 people from the mayor’s office and DHS in which she reinforced the strategy as well as the importance of their work. As Cevasco recalled, Zeilinger reminded the attendees that “you get to go home at the end of the night and actually have somewhere to sleep and the people that you’re going to fight for don’t.” This was emblematic of how, even with detractors and skeptics, Zeilinger injected a vigorous spirit into the reform effort. “Laura...had a vision for what she wanted it to look like and a clear North Star to guide you every day,” explained Cevasco. “...I think because Laura believed it was possible, we were all [saying], ‘Yes, if she really believes this, she’s really going to support this. You can do the work to make it happen.’” “Laura had a vision,” added Thomas Roberts, the program manager for Short-Term Family Housing, “and she was able to articulate the goal and answer questions and overcome objections and the misconceptions...”²⁵

While Zeilinger’s leadership helped advance the effort to close D.C. General and launch the Short-Term Family Housing shelters, it did not completely obviate tension. For instance, there were tense negotiations between the mayor and council chairman over whether to place some of the facilities on District-owned land before the DC Council voted to approve the plan in May 2016.²⁶ In addition, the District faced multiple lawsuits from groups that opposed having facilities in their wards. This included Ward Three,

the wealthiest area in the city. The lawsuits contended that the District should not have been granted zoning relief for the Short-Term Family Housing facilities, but in fall 2017 the lawsuits were dismissed. The court opinion cited “Homeward DC,” the strategic plan created by the Interagency Council on Homelessness, which emphasized the problem with the size of D.C. General and that “large facilities or campuses congregating hundreds of families simply do not work.” “I think one of the lessons,” Zeilinger said, “in doing this really hard work where there’s going to be a lot of opposition is having a plan. ... Having it documented in a plan that we were following the policy that we set out turned out to be very important in getting the zoning relief in all that we needed.”²⁷

Buoyed by the dismissal of the lawsuits, Zeilinger and DHS were able to take the final steps to open the Short-Term Family Housing sites and close D.C. General. This included securing the DC Council’s passage in December 2017 of Administration-led amendments to the Homeless Services Reform Act, having a ribbon cutting for the first Short-Term Family Housing building in September 2018, and ensuring that all of the families in D.C. General were transitioning to housing. “There were families who had been...at D.C. Village and then had been in hotels and had been at D.C. General,” Zeilinger reflected. “And I [said], ‘We are not moving them to another shelter. We have got to figure out what is happening with this family that can help them get to permanency and a place of stability.’”²⁸ This set the stage for a poignant moment in late October 2018 when the District shuttered D.C. General after an official bolted the door. “We embarked four years ago on closing D.C. General,” Bowser remarked. “We all believed it was too big, too run-down, too isolated to serve families who need emergency shelter. Now the last family has moved out of the facility.” Reflecting on the process, the mayor acknowledged the challenges (including the political debate and lawsuits) but also underscored the sense of urgency in an allusion to the disappearance of Relisha Rudd. “*We as a city have said we don’t want to lose another child,*” Bowser emphasized. “We want families who are

24 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; “Advisory Neighborhood Commissions,” Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://anc.dc.gov/page/about-anc> (accessed on February 20, 2025); and Interview with Jenna Grant Cevasco and Thomas Roberts, December 4, 2024. Hereafter cited as Cevasco and Roberts interview.

25 Cevasco and Roberts interview.

26 Martin Austerhuhle, “With Final Vote, D.C. Moves To Close D.C. General Homeless Shelter,” WAMU, May 31, 2016, available at https://wamu.org/story/16/05/31/with_final_vote_dc_moves_to_close_dc_general_homeless_shelter/ (accessed on January 23, 2025).

27 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.

28 “D.C. Law 22-65. Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act of 2017.” Council of the District of Columbia, available at <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/laws/22-65> (accessed on February 20, 2025); Presentation by Zeilinger et al; and Zeilinger interview.

experiencing emergencies to have a safe place to land so they can take care of employment, take care of training and provide a better life for their families.”²⁹

For her part, Zeilinger highlighted the speed with which the District navigated this difficult process. “We did the Short-Term Family Housing...really fast for government,” reflected the director, who emphasized the importance of the mayor’s political will in convening stakeholders for biweekly meetings on the progress of each site and navigating the at times fractious legislative process and lawsuits. She stressed that the District had not only operated with alacrity but also emerged with an improved, multifaceted approach. “Thanks to a myriad of reforms, today’s homeless service system is significantly better equipped to support families compared to three and a half years ago,” she wrote. “Together, these reforms position us to close D.C. General now. I’m honored and excited to be a part of the progress.”³⁰

Scaling and Solidifying New Services

After closing D.C. General and opening the Short-Term Family Housing facilities, Zeilinger shifted her focus to the next phase of reform, which she anticipated would focus on enhancing the Family Re-Housing Stabilization Program (or “Rapid Rehousing,” as the program was often called). Over 95 percent of families in Short-Term Family Housing exited to “Rapid Rehousing” through which they were placed in an apartment in the District and received a rent subsidy for twelve to eighteen months.³¹ Families in Rapid Rehousing were also paired with a case manager who could help them develop a strategy for how to proceed after the subsidy ended. This frequently included obtaining TANF benefits, identifying ways to boost their income, and connecting with other relevant resources (e.g., behavioral health specialists or representatives from the school

system). The thinking behind the program—which was created following the Great Recession to prevent a surge in homelessness—was that if people had stable housing, it would be easier for them to focus on bolstering their economic mobility and determining their next step. “Rapid is this big hub to assist families,” explained Darrell Cason, Deputy Administrator for Families at DHS. “In some cases, it’s working to increase housing stability, and families go and move to potentially stay in the District. In some cases, they look and partner up with other family members to remain stably housed. Or in some cases, they look outside of the District.”³²

Having invested so much time in developing a system to enhance prevention and support for families experiencing homelessness, Zeilinger felt it was imperative to devote similar energy to improve Rapid Rehousing. To that end, DHS convened a task force with a range of stakeholders (e.g., customers, government officials, providers, landlords, and advocates) to examine the program. The task force, which completed its work in 2019, had disturbing findings.³³ Families were receiving formulaic services as opposed to supports tailored to their needs, and there was extensive turnover among case managers. Taking lessons from the successful implementation of a new model for family shelter in the Short-Term Family Housing program, Zeilinger and DHS took on direct management of Rapid Rehousing contracts, in what they hoped would be the first step to make the program more effective and targeted to families’ needs. “Essential to our approach,” Zeilinger had explained to the Rapid Rehousing task force, “is recognizing the strengths of each family and facilitating meaningful connections to resources that support participants to grow their incomes and address their needs while reinforcing what is working well in their lives.” “There’s a trust factor in all of this,” Cason added. “A family has to trust us as an

29 Emphasis added. Fenit Nirappil, “D.C. General, the city’s troubled megashelter for homeless families, finally closes,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2018, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/dc-general-the-citys-troubled-megashelter-for-homeless-families-finally-closes/2018/10/30/0db5dc4c-dbbc-11e8-b732-3c72cbf131f2_story.html (accessed on February 20, 2025).

30 Zeilinger interview; and Zeilinger, “Three Years of Progress in Reforming DC’s Family Homeless Services System.”

31 A small percentage of families qualify for “long-term, federally funded vouchers...or move into permanent supportive housing units, which means they get rent support for as long as they need it.” Zauzmer Weil, “The pandemic helped D.C. slash family homelessness. But a new crisis looms.”

32 “Family Re-Housing Stabilization Program,” Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://dhs.dc.gov/page/family-re-housing-stabilization-program%C2%A0%C2%A0> (accessed on February 27, 2025); Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; and Interview with Darrell Cason, Kia Williams, Brian Campbell, and Laura Zeilinger, December 4, 2024. Hereafter cited as Cason, Williams, Campbell, and Zeilinger interview.

33 Zeilinger interview; Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; and Testimony of Laura Green Zeilinger, Director, Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, Fiscal Year 2019-2020 Performance Oversight Hearing, available at https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/page_content/attachments/DHS%20FY19-20%20POH%20Testimony_1-28-20.pdf (accessed on February 27, 2025).

agency, trust government, [and] trust who I'm working with case-management wise to be able to kind of work and engage."³⁴

Unfortunately, shortly after the Rapid Rehousing task force completed its work, the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. This disrupted the reform effort in part because the department had to shift its focus to responding to the pandemic. DHS's responsibilities included ensuring kids in shelters could access remote school, modifying shelter operations to decrease health risks, and increasing flexibility in public benefits programs like SNAP.³⁵ The pandemic also had significant impacts on Rapid Rehousing. Most notably, DHS extended the program for many families because it was hard for them to increase their incomes amid a public health crisis. This resulted in the program expanding to 3,500 families by the end of the pandemic at which point DHS did not have the resources to sustain them and still had not fully implemented the reforms it had envisioned after the task force had completed its work.³⁶

Adding to the difficulty, Zeilinger and DHS became the target of criticism during the pandemic. The concerns revolved around the quality of Rapid Rehousing accommodations. As Zeilinger explained, the DC Housing Authority did the inspections, which had to be completed virtually amid COVID-19. This resulted in situations where problems with housing were not identified before people moved in. Although DHS was not conducting the inspections, there was significant blowback against the agency, including protests outside Zeilinger's home. Zeilinger had initially invited the leader of the protesters to connect with members of her staff and reached out to the Housing Authority to try to address the issue with the inspections, but looking back she realized that she could have responded to the protest leader directly from the beginning. "The lesson for me...was that people want to be seen and heard," Zeilinger explained, "and it's not about who's right, whose responsibility is it to ensure quality

housing conditions. There's very little I can do in that space...But I had to remind myself: 'It's not about being right; it's about getting it right.'" "I probably thought I was a good listener, but I wasn't," Zeilinger told *The Washington Post*. "I really changed in the way that I've really listened to what people need to tell me."³⁷

Although the pandemic disrupted DHS's momentum, it did not completely halt reform. This included making incremental changes to Rapid Rehousing. For instance, there previously had been a process through which families in the program would have their support renewed every three months, provided they had developed a plan with their case manager and were making progress toward their employment goals. However, landlords were reluctant to partner with DHS if there was a risk that participants might lose their subsidy in the middle of a twelve-month lease. In addition, the decision-making process for which families would be extended could be subjective (e.g., it depended on advocacy from individual case managers), and the uncertainty for families about how long they would have support created confusion. As a result, the department eliminated the renewal process and decided to support all families in the program for a minimum of twelve months. Along with introducing this modification to Rapid Rehousing, DHS expanded DC Flex, a pilot rent subsidy program introduced in 2017 that gave low-income families money to spend on rent for up to five years. Originally, the subsidy was \$7,200 per year, but DHS increased the figure to \$8,400. The agency also added budgeting and financial literacy courses and began working with a new provider that had a specific model for increasing income. "That's one of the...main features of the DC Flex program," explained Kia Williams, program manager for the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. "You do have this money here, you can use it toward rent, but also let's put other things in place for you that can assist you in maintaining your income or increasing your

34 Zeilinger interview; Personal communication by email with Laura Zeilinger, May 28, 2025; "Family Rehousing and Stabilization Program (FRSP) Task Force Meeting #1 – Annotated Notes," Government of the District of Columbia, September 11, 2019, available at https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/publication/attachments/Meeting%20Notes%20from%20Task%20Force%201%2009112019_1.pdf (accessed on February 27, 2025); and Cason, Williams, Campbell, and Zeilinger interview.

35 Zeilinger interview; and "Response to COVID-19," Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://dhs.dc.gov/page/responsetocovid19> (accessed on February 27, 2025).

36 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; and Marissa Lang and Meagan Flynn, "Families sue D.C. for ending housing aid in unprecedented case," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/10/25/dc-rapid-rehousing-lawsuit/> (accessed on February 27, 2025).

37 Zeilinger interview; and Meagan Flynn, "She oversaw D.C. poverty aid for a decade. Here's what she learned." *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2025, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2025/01/26/dc-homelessness-laura-zeilinger/> (accessed on February 24, 2025).

income. So once five years is over, you will not have to return back to the homeless system.”³⁸

Still, the most significant reform involved the introduction of the District of Columbia Career Mobility Action Plan (Career MAP). Career MAP is a demonstration project providing families who were formerly homeless with a range of services (e.g., rental assistance, coaching, and cash payments) as they advanced professionally and risked losing other benefits as their incomes increased.³⁹ The conversations that seeded the program had begun years earlier among leaders in the agency and continued in 2019 when participants in the Rapid Rehousing task force discussed what DHS could do to support families around their economic mobility. One challenge many families encountered was the “benefits cliff,” a phenomenon where they start generating more income and no longer qualify for benefits (e.g., healthcare, food, child care, and housing) but do not gain enough revenue to offset the benefits they have lost. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta found that “Due to...benefits cliffs, a hypothetical single adult, one child (aged three) family living in DC would receive no financial gain from a wage increase between \$11,000 and \$65,000 of earned income.” At best, this creates a “marginal tax,” and at worst it puts families at risk of becoming homeless, particularly given D.C.’s high cost of living.⁴⁰

DHS engaged in an extensive dialogue to develop a strategy to help families navigate this challenge. This included reaching out to The Lab @ DC, an internal research hub in the District’s Government, which conducted stakeholder interviews and did focus groups with families in Rapid Rehousing to ascertain the supports that would be most valuable. To aid with program

design, DHS connected with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, which helped the agency model different ways of disregarding income and doing offsets for benefits families might lose. Additionally, DHS joined the “Beyond the Cliff Coalition,” a network of nonprofits, state and local governments, and collaboratives piloting creative approaches surrounding the benefits cliff. Within DHS, Zeilinger encouraged conversations across different parts of the agency that helped to break down silos. “She came in with just an amazing wealth of expertise before she got here,” observed Geoff King, Program Manager for Career MAP, “and then is just someone who does the work and really understands how everything is working. ... I think she’s really good at...encouraging teams to bubble up ideas and work together.”⁴¹

This set the stage for DHS to launch Career MAP as a demonstration project beginning in summer 2022 with the random selection of 500 families from Rapid Rehousing.⁴² Originally funded by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the initiative—which now receives \$18.9 million per year in financing from the DC Council—provides support for the families for up to five years in three main areas: household resources, career advancement, and family support. Specifically, if families lose any TANF or SNAP benefits as their incomes increase, Career MAP replaces those shortfalls dollar for dollar first with a rent discount. Then, if a family’s rent goes down to zero and they still had not been made whole from the loss of TANF or SNAP supports, and/or if they have out-of-pocket healthcare or childcare premiums due to benefit losses, the program provides families up to \$10,000 per year to offset lost benefits. What’s more, every month families pay their

38 “Can a shallow, flexible rent subsidy prevent homelessness?” The Lab @ DC, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/flexible-rent-subsidy> (accessed on February 24, 2025); and Cason, Williams, Campbell, and Zeilinger interview.

39 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; “Career Mobility Action Plan (Career MAP),” Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, available at https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/page_content/attachments/Career%20MAP%20One-Pager_2022.pdf (accessed on February 25, 2025); and Ellie Silverman, “One year in, D.C. program helps those who fall off ‘benefits cliff,’” The Washington Post, April 9, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/04/09/career-map-pilot-dc/> (accessed on February 25, 2025).

40 Silverman, “One year in, D.C. program helps those who fall off ‘benefits cliff’”; Elias Ilin and Alvaro Sanchez, “Mitigating Benefits Cliffs for Low-Income Families: District of Columbia Career Mobility Action Plan as a Case Study,” Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Community and Economic Development Discussion Paper, No. 23-1, September 2023, available at <https://www.atlantafed.org/-/media/documents/community-development/publications/discussion-papers/2023/01-a-case-study-mitigating-benefits-cliffs-in-the-district-of-columbia.pdf> (accessed on February 25, 2025); and Interview with Geoff King and Laura Zeilinger, December 4, 2024. Hereafter cited as King and Zeilinger interview.

41 “About Us,” The Lab @ DC, available at <https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/about-us> (accessed on February 25, 2025); “Beyond the Cliff Coalition Members,” available at <https://www.beyondthecoffcoalition.org/coalition-members> (accessed on February 25, 2025); and King and Zeilinger interview.

42 Originally, 600 families were selected for the program, but there had been attrition because some families qualified for permanent housing vouchers. King and Zeilinger interview.



portion of rent, the program provides a \$200 deposit into an escrow account that they can access once they have been in the program for at least four years. This helped families build a nest egg for when the program ends after five years. Families can also receive \$1,000 per year in emergency payments, a recognition that a small crisis had the potential to derail progress. Finally, each family was assigned a navigator who employed a two-generation, whole-family approach and provided coaching and connections to different resources (e.g., job training, adult basic education programs, higher education, mental health support, and financial management counseling). Overall, the program aims to create a bridge that gives families who had experienced homelessness a chance to reach the middle class.⁴³

By late 2024, there was preliminary evidence that the program was having an impact. Because the participants in Career MAP had been selected through a lottery, DHS is partnering with The Lab @ DC on an evaluation examining outcomes (e.g., employment for adults and education for children) for families in the program versus a control group of those not selected. Although it will take time to capture the full results of that study, DHS has seen gradual increases in reported employment among families in the program as well as strong engagement. For instance, families are required to meet with their navigator once a

month, with over 80 percent of participants in compliance and many taking advantage of the opportunity to meet more frequently. The program has also started to see small increases in the number of families earning enough extra income to qualify for the cliff-related benefits Career MAP provided.⁴⁴ And then there were stories like those of Quany Lynch, who found a job with the Transportation Security Administration with a \$58,500 salary. Seemingly a great opportunity, the income figure was too high for her to continue receiving government benefits but not enough to offset the loss from that support. She feared her family would become homeless, but through Career MAP, she was able to receive financial support to compensate for the loss of TANF and SNAP benefits, participate in a training program that led to a new job with more advancement opportunities, and envision a future as an entrepreneur. “I want my children to be able to have something to aspire to, to say ‘Mommy did this,’” Lynch said. “Or, ‘My mom was a manager or supervisor’ or eventually ‘an owner of her own company.’”⁴⁵

Career MAP is just past the halfway mark through its five-year implementation, and the program’s rigorous evaluation will provide valuable lessons for health and human services leaders trying to move toward more generative outcomes. As King observed, “sometimes you can feel just trapped by the structure that you have.” In this

43 Ibid.; Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; and “Career MAP,” Department of Human Services, Government of the District of Columbia, available at <https://dhs.dc.gov/page/career-map> (accessed on February 27, 2025).

44 King and Zeilinger interview.

45 Silverman, “One year in, D.C. program helps those who fall off ‘benefits cliff.’”



case, DHS had very little control over how federal benefits (and the accompanying benefits cliffs) worked. However, by working with a range of external stakeholders and navigating internal silos, the agency was able to develop an innovative pilot that could help families navigate a major challenge. “We are realistic in the fact that we know not everyone’s going to succeed,” King explained, “but we also know that relative to most things we’ve tried before, this really does give a number of families a chance to really significantly increase their earnings.” What’s more, DHS anticipates that if the program is effective, it could save the government money in other areas by decreasing the number of families that cycled back to government benefits. This potentially pointed to a strategy the agency could scale in the future. “The best defense against future homelessness is a job that pays a family-sustaining wage,” Zeilinger said. “And once people are in careers, they tend to really soar.”⁴⁶

The Path Ahead

In November 2024, Zeilinger announced that she would be stepping down at the end of the year. To some extent, this was a recognition of the toll of ten years of leadership amid stressful conditions, which had involved not only managing the response to COVID-19 but also figuring out how to expand the agency’s services after thousands of migrants had been bused to the city from the southern border. Zeilinger, who had taken a sabbatical in 2023, observed: “I...see that my energy is waning, and it’s time for something different for me.” As she transitioned, there were important next steps for the agency to explore.

These included doing more to support individuals (not just families) experiencing homelessness as well as strengthening the Rapid Rehousing program (which had continued to be a target of criticism as DHS removed people who had been in the program since the pandemic). More broadly, Zeilinger pointed to the need to bring government together around “economic mobility and really breaking down the systems that keep people poor.” She envisioned an opportunity for a multi-stakeholder process to look at those issues “more holistically with people at the table aligned around a strategy.”⁴⁷

For her part, Bowser highlighted the potential benefits of translating strategies that had worked in the family homelessness system to support individuals experiencing homelessness. An integral aspect of this would be continuing to “expand shelter options” as well as designing approaches that responded “to the needs of our community...” Above all, Bowser underscored the importance of having a foundational ethos to shape the District’s efforts. “We think that the safest place for our neighbors who are unhoused is to be on a pathway to permanent housing,” the mayor explained. “That will remain our guiding value.”⁴⁸

Even as Bowser, Zeilinger, and DHS identified priorities for the future, they had already accomplished something transformative. In 2016, there were about 1,500 families experiencing homelessness in Washington, D.C., and in 2024 that count was down to 539. In addition, in 2024, there were only ten families experiencing chronic homelessness (defined as someone who was homeless for a year or more or had four or more episodes of

⁴⁶ King and Zeilinger interview.

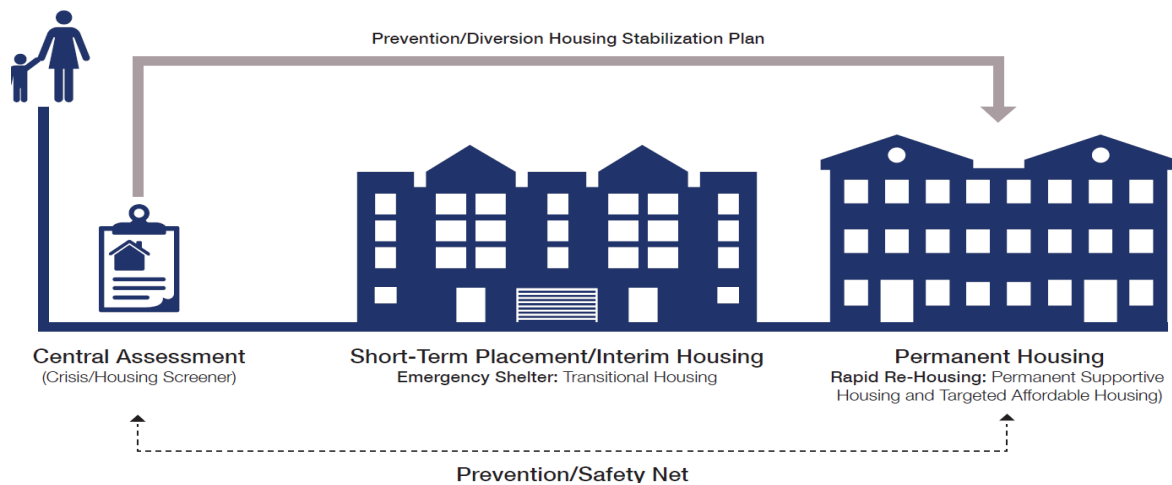
⁴⁷ Michael Brice-Saddler, “Bowser announces new sabbatical program for longtime D.C. agency leaders,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/06/01/bowser-sabbatical-government-agency-workers/> (accessed on February 25, 2025); Flynn, “She oversaw D.C. poverty aid for a decade. Here’s what she learned”; and Zeilinger interview.

⁴⁸ Personal communication by email, September 9, 2025.

homelessness over three years). DHS was also consistently achieving its goal of having the average stay in Short-Term Family Housing sites be under 90 days, which enabled the agency to reach more families in need. What’s more, over 85 percent of families that had participated in Rapid Rehousing did not come back to the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center seeking services. Finally, in May 2025, when the mayor released her ten-year progress report, she identified closing D.C. General as one of her administration’s biggest accomplishments and noted that, “...since 2015, we’ve driven down family homelessness by 61%.” From the mayor’s perspective, the District had achieved this success in part because of its decision to

invest in proven strategies (e.g., improving prevention) as well as its commitment to implementing those efforts in a way that was “tailored to the needs of our community and the needs of our families.”⁴⁹ All of this was emblematic of how the District had completely reoriented its approach. “When you look back at what the system was in 2015 to now,” Zeilinger said, “it’s unrecognizable.”⁵⁰ And therein lay a broader realization. As Zeilinger said at the ribbon cutting for The Aston, “Government doesn’t do anything alone, and we do amazing things all together. ... When we open ourselves to learn, to evolve, and when we’re willing to be bold, we can do amazing things.”⁵¹

Exhibit A: System of Care for Families



Under Zeilinger’s leadership, DHS adopted a systematic approach to supporting families that were at risk of or experiencing homelessness. It began with a “Central Assessment” at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center after which families could be provided with preventative services or, when necessary, accommodations that were conducive to helping them transition to permanency quickly.

Source: Adapted from “Activating Bold Change in Washington, DC: Family System Reform,” Presentation by Laura Zeilinger, Rachel Pierre, Darrell Cason, Kia Williams, and Thomas Roberts, December 3, 2024.

49 Ibid.

50 Presentation by Zeilinger et al.; Cason, Williams, Campbell, and Zeilinger interview; “The 10-Year Progress Report: A Decade of Delivering,” Government of the District of Columbia, Muriel Bowser, Mayor, available at <https://progressreport.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/progressreport/publication/attachments/10YR-Progress-Report.pdf> (accessed on June 5, 2025); and Flynn, “She oversaw D.C. poverty aid for a decade. Here’s what she learned”

51 “Mayor Bowser Celebrates the Opening of the Aston, 11/25/24,” DC Mayor’s Office, YouTube.



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