



March 24, 2020

Dear Mayor Bowser,

We're writing as a coalition of over 130 youth serving organizations, and a community of advocates working to ensure our children and youth experiencing homelessness have a safe place to live, grow and thrive.

Today we want to share our collective expertise and insights on what will be necessary in the coming weeks and months to continue protecting our young people experiencing extreme vulnerability and housing insecurity moving forward. Before we shift to our recommendations, please know we greatly appreciate all that your administration, and in particular DHS and the ICH are doing to mitigate the very real threat of COVID-19 to our most vulnerable residents. Their collaboration and communication during this period have been exceptional.

To that end, we have two broad sets of recommendations we believe will further our shared goal of protecting DC's youth experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity during this public health crisis.

1. Ensure non-profit housing partners, particularly youth programs with unique and exceptional staffing needs, have the resources they need to remain open and safe throughout the course of this crisis: Youth housing and shelter programs are successful because we support young people with significant trauma in developmentally appropriate ways. This work and unique focus are incredibly important now. But, at present, our organizations are spread thin and stretched to the max.

We're working with increasing numbers of youth who are normally in school or work, but are now being sheltered in place. Young people are actively seeking additional services (food, laundry, safe spaces) at our drop in centers and from case managers. Concurrently, we know that young people do not feel themselves vulnerable to the coronavirus though they will often be carriers and asymptomatic. Meaning they continue to gather at our sites and in community.

To meet the needs of our youth, and minimize their role in further spreading COVID-19, maintaining staff levels in youth programs is critical.

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Now more than ever, we need to have staff who will provide continual guidance and education for our most vulnerable young people. Yet, due to Covid-19, we're also asking staff to self quarantine if sick. As we look ahead, there is a strong likelihood we will need additional fill-in (per diem) staff to help ensure our programs and services remain viable; and our young people get the support they need in safe locations.

To that end, we applaud the roll out of the COVID-19 Small Business Recovery Microgrant Program. Funding that can be used to stabilize businesses and organizations that have experienced substantial financial insecurity between January and March is important at this time.

However programs will continue to face exceptional and evolving financial challenges. As structured, this grant program only looks backward- not forward- and the cost burdens many nonprofits will face as a result of this crisis have not yet been fully realized.

For these reasons, we are strongly encouraging you to expand upon this program.

Provide emergency funding to DHS for targeted grant enhancements: While DHS has been working proactively to ensure that grantee partners can make real time budget modifications as the need for overtime or per-diem staffing arise; their current resources and ability to be flexible are not infinite.

By providing additional funding to DHS, DHS will be better equipped to nimbly meet youth and grantee needs. This is particularly true for programs with 24/7 staffing requirements, as is the case with many youth housing programs. Additionally, emergency enhancements will help us work with DHS to:

- Ensure deep cleaning occurs regularly at our facilities. We know this is one of the ways to slow transmission.
- Provide extra food, cleaning materials and perhaps medical supplies such as thermometers, gloves and for medication for young people in need.

2. Coordinated Communication for nonprofits and young people:

Providers are encountering real time challenges. DHS and the Interagency Council on Homelessness are working diligently with community and partners to ensure that accurate information is shared in a timely way. Yet, gaps and challenges remain with sister agencies. Minimizing disinformation, or scattered messaging is vital. To streamline and maximize communication efforts we have two primary recommendations:

Enhance coordination of agency communication: We have to reduce “noise” and amplify the most important information and actions in the coming weeks. Yet, many nonprofit partners work with multiple government agencies and are being given multiple and at times competing messages or information.

To the best extent possible, agencies should coordinate emergency conference calls or other public messaging among each other to ensure nonprofit partners are not asked to be on numerous agency calls or meetings at the same time. For the social safety net sector, even encouraging cross agency participation in conference calls or messaging would be beneficial.

Develop specific messaging content and methods of delivery for youth and young adults: Public messaging efforts and campaigns on the spread of this virus, and the services available to residents must be culturally competent.

We are concerned that young people do not understand their role in changing the trajectory of this virus. We want to be thought partners in how we are communicating what the risks of this pandemic are to young people. Additionally, we've observed that youth and young adults are unsure what types of emergency services are available to them. From food access, to sustained TANF and SNAP benefits, eviction stays, or unemployment benefits, youth need to understand what, when, where, and how they can obtain support or access these benefits during this emergency.

Youth and young adults require specific messaging, in terms of content and method of delivery. We can be thought partners in helping to draft and disseminate messaging targeted to youth and young adults. As public awareness and communication efforts continue, we are here to offer our assistance and expertise.

Again, we want to be good partners in this work and align our efforts in all ways. We appreciate your consideration of these recommendations; we stand ready (via DCAYA) to be thought partners in the weeks and months to come. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your administration as this crisis unfolds.

Sincerely,

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