

DC Department of Human Services

*Shaping the Future: Innovations in Shelter Provision
Lessons from the DC Experience*

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Department of Human Services (DHS)

Family Services Administration (FSA)

- Homeless services – families
- Homeless services – individuals
- Homeless services – youth
- Eviction prevention
- Supportive housing
- Community services
- Etc.

Economic Services Administration (ESA)

- SNAP
- TANF
- Childcare services
- Interim disability assistance
- Burial assistance
- Medical assistance
- Etc.

- **FSA is responsible for the delivery of homeless services for both families and individuals across DC**
- **In recent years, various innovations in our shelter system include:**
 - Departure from large, centralized family shelter in favor of new, smaller, distributed sites
 - Innovations in congregate shelter design for individuals
 - Acquiring old buildings and renovating for non-congregate shelters for medically vulnerable and adult families

FAMILY SYSTEM OVERVIEW

- **February 2016 DC's Mayor Muriel Bowser unveils plan to close large, centralized family shelter DC General (capacity = 270)**
- **Proposed plan centered on creation of new, smaller apartment-style shelters in all 8 wards (capacity ≤ 50)**
 - Included parts of the District with historically few homelessness services
 - Significant concerns from the community (“NIMBYism”) on multiple issues:
 - Government’s ability to design, construct, and maintain high quality buildings
 - Safety in the community
 - Impact on schools
 - Saturation of services
 - Loitering
- **Robust strategy implemented to work through community concerns while still driving the project forward**

- **District government hosted community meetings across all wards on a single night**
- **Senior leadership across multiple District agencies out in the community (not always possible but highly effective)**
- **Followed up larger meetings with smaller, targeted meetings:**
 - **Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (hyper local, non-partisan, neighborhood body made up of elected representatives – each represents about 2000 DC residents)**
 - **Civic associations**
 - **In-boundary schools**
 - **Faith organizations**
 - **Individuals' living rooms**
- **Community input on design/aesthetic choices of building/space**
- **Official Advisory Teams formed in every community**

- **Good Neighbor Policies (GNP) developed with each community and will address:**
 - Maintenance of property
 - Safety and security
 - Conduct and behavior
 - Communication and mutual respect
- **The scope of the GNP covers maintenance and daily operations of the program. It does not cover other government services in the neighborhood or the programming that happens inside the building.**
- **The expectations laid out in the GNP will be included in DHS' contract with service providers.**

- **DC General was closed in 2018**
- **7 of 8 wards have new short term family housing facilities**
 - Variety of factors led to Ward 2 not completing the project (new developments coming soon, however)
- **These efforts and other system reforms have nearly ended family homelessness in DC**



- **Key lessons learned:**

- Ensure support and buy-in from political leadership
- Provide meaningful opportunities for community engagement
- Use external validators to provide credible messaging
- Siting a replacement program is easier than siting a new program in a space
- A single community does not have a single voice
- Concerns vary from one community to the next
- There can never be too much communication

INDIVIDUAL SYSTEM OVERVIEW

- **DC operates multiple “low-barrier” shelters (LBS) for individuals**
 - Important part of safety net
 - LBS meets needs of many clients and allows for quick access with as little friction as possible
 - Stigma and hesitation around larger format congregate shelter still a challenge
 - New renovations have emphasized trauma-informed design processes in layout and construction

- Example: **the new 801 East men’s shelter**

- **801 East men's shelter**

- Located in the ward with the highest poverty rate
- Redeveloped shelter in area of new hospital campus construction (which helped push project forward)
- Relatively isolated from housing and retail
- Community outreach throughout the area met with positive, welcoming feedback – very limited push back



Old



New!

- **Thoughtful, intentional design decisions**

- The space was designed for the program; the program wasn't shoehorned into any space
- Trauma-informed design principles
 - Idea that physical spaces can promote safety, well-being, healing



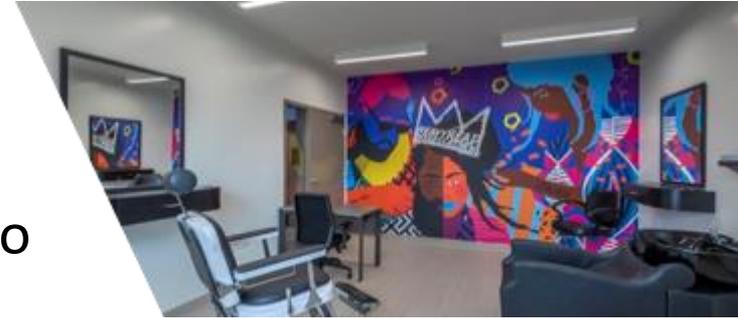
Old



New!

- **Other design innovations:**

- Smaller congregate spaces
- Robust, indoor recreation space (also helps with community concerns of loitering)
- Longer hallways so security can see more space without being physically close to clients
- Population subsets in specific sections
 - Work beds
 - Senior beds
 - Medical respite beds
 - General population low barrier beds



- **Lessons learned**

- Know your community and anticipate their concerns
- User input in design
- Be open to external factors creating opportunities
- Design to promote healing (e.g. trauma-informed)
- Design to integrate with community (e.g. indoor recreation to reduce loitering; community input on external aesthetic choices)

- **Like many jurisdictions, during COVID, DC operated hotels for quarantine and for individuals experiencing homelessness at the highest risk for COVID (7 hotels at the peak of the program which served thousands)**
 - DC considered using HOME-ARP funds to purchase hotels
 - Ultimately decided to leverage the funds to purchase other buildings to convert into non-congregate shelters
 - Non-congregate structure beneficial for several reasons:
 - Less stigma and more draw than congregate shelters
 - Easier to support those with medical vulnerabilities
 - More flexibility with family structure (mix-gender adult families can be sheltered together)

- **The Aston: DC's first non-congregate shelter model (former GWU dorm)**
 - Residents who are matched to housing resource *and* who cannot be appropriately served at other shelters
 - Building capacity: 190
 - Proposed client capacity: 100 (50 at opening; 50 more after 2 months)
 - Slated to open Summer 2024
 - Located in neighborhood with lots of tourism, high end restaurants, shopping
- **Getting across the finish line has not been without challenges...**



- **Community reaction**

- Located in the one ward that did not get a new short term family housing shelter
- Significant push back from some community members
- Located in neighborhood with many restaurants, bars, and tourist attractions
 - *ANC Commissioner said he "seriously [questioned] the choosing of this location, based on the fact that it sits across the street from Michelin star restaurant. It's got another Michelin star restaurant around the corner, and another around the corner from that."*

Powerful Law Firms and Rich Property Owners Are Trying To Block a West End Homeless Shelter

D.C. wants to buy an old GW dorm and convert it into an innovative shelter. Wealthy forces opposing the project got some help from Councilmember-turned-lobbyist David Grosso.

Anonymous Neighbors File a Second Lawsuit Seeking to Block a West End Homeless Shelter

The Aston has drawn opposition from wealthy neighbors and property owners since the city proposed the project earlier this year.

Plan for West End D.C. homeless shelter faces mounting opposition

Shelter opponents have secured the backing of high-powered law firms as the city seeks to open the building as soon as this fall

D.C.

D.C. delays plan for homeless shelter at former GWU dorm

The six-month delay comes as neighbors who oppose the project have filed a second lawsuit to block it, raising zoning concerns.

Turning a former George Washington University dorm into a homeless shelter stirs opposition

- **25 E Street NW Shelter: next planned non-congregate shelter site (former hotel)**

- Same population will be served as the *Aston plus* some specialty beds:

- Those requiring specific case management (work beds, senior beds, etc.)
- Beds prioritized for women who are unsheltered or residing in LBS

- Building capacity: 190



- **Community engagement**

- Starting early, going broad
- Early documented support from local ANC leaders
- Generally welcomed by community
- Recently some concerns from businesses and high rises – plan underway to rapidly outreach

- **Funding**

- Leveraged local dollars set aside in capital projects budget
- Currently under contract with owner to complete renovations before we finalize sale

- **Lessons learned**

- **ENGAGE → ENGAGE → ENGAGE!**

- Work on political support from top (mayor, councilmember, ANC commissioners, neighborhood groups)
 - Townhalls led by program staff
 - Formal presentations and Q/A sessions with agency leaders and community
 - Informal, smaller scale discussions (living rooms, churches, etc.)
 - Low barrier, high touch communication (e.g. some of the most vocal, concerned residents have direct phone numbers to program team)
 - Ultimately, stick with “DC values,” stay the course, stay positive

Thank you!

Questions?