

Testimony

East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Inc.

Before

The Committee on Human Services Budget Oversight Hearing

Good morning Chairperson Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services.

I am Alia King Manshio, family support worker at East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Inc. I am very pleased to sit before you today and speak on behalf of the System Transformation Initiative (STI) Program. The STI program is a transitional housing program designed to help families transition from the shelter to self-sufficiency in the community and was implemented in response to the closure of the DC Village Family Shelter in 2007. Currently our agency works with 18 families in the STI program, which is down from the 21 we received at the program's inception. For myself as well as many of my colleagues these are some of our most challenging families to work with. I use the word "challenging" not because there is anything organically wrong or deficient with these families but because we as workers are faced with the intricate task of moving families who have lived a life of chronic homelessness towards self-sufficiency in two years. Of course to paint the entire portrait we must include issues of substance abuse, mental health, lack of adequate education, and limited family support to get an accurate account of the true depth of challenges our families must battle.

Now what does self-sufficiency look like, or more accurately, what does healthy interdependence in the community look like? Well for the purposes of the program, it is measured by the families' ability to obtain independent rental housing, permanent housing, or permanent supportive housing. This we all understand is no easy task. Still, with the appropriate resources in place and effective interagency collaboration, it is possible. Indeed, it is exactly those two components, appropriate resources and effective interagency collaboration, that prove

the largest challenges for myself and other front line workers trying to support families towards self-sufficiency. When I speak on resources, the major challenge is employment. Now I am well aware that this is not an issue specific to our clients or even the District of Columbia. I am well aware that our nation as a whole is suffering from high unemployment. Indeed, here in the Nation's Capital, the unemployment rate, as of April, is 10 percent (*U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics*) however it is important to note that in Ward 7, where our agency is located, the unemployment rate is twice as high at 20 percent (*The Washington Examiner*). The issue, however, is not simply that there are not enough jobs for our clients. As a family support worker, I have found the major barrier to employment to be education. It is no coincidence then that the literacy rate for Ward 7 is also low (*The Washington Informer*, Feb. 24, 2011). In the majority of instances, one's education must be addressed before employment. While there seems to be numerous efforts throughout the City to provide our families with training opportunities to improve their chances of securing employment, the prerequisite for most of these programs is a high school diploma or GED. How then do you tell someone who dropped out in the 10th grade that they should focus on getting their high school diploma when the program only promises them two years of rental assistance? Is it realistic to resolve the issue of homeless in two years when in fact many of us who are self-sufficient have been preparing for it the better part of our lives?

In addition to the numerous training programs, there are also many programs that aim to assist clients directly with job readiness and placement. Still, in speaking with my clients many inform me that such programs often lead to dead ends and do not provide enough support with the job search. For example, many of my clients will be instructed to fill out applications online; however, in sitting down with my clients, I find that some need additional support to do so. The

same holds true for clients who attend the workforce development programs required by TANF recipients.

Please allow me for a moment to state the obvious which is that literacy and education impact employment which impacts housing and ultimately a family's ability to be self-sufficient. Since it very clear that one's ability to obtain housing is the culmination of multiple systems, the issue of housing and homelessness must be addressed in a multi-systemic manner. This brings me to the second challenge that I mentioned earlier and that is effective interagency collaboration. This means that those, such as myself, providing the case management services need to have stronger working relationships with GED and high school diploma programs, training and apprenticeship programs, as well as those workforce programs linked with TANF benefits. Such collaborations are vital to providing our STI clients with the best chances of being successful in the program.

That being said, I have witnessed first-hand that the STI program can be very beneficial to families. The fact that clients enter into their own leases with the landlords provides them with a sense of ownership over their livelihood that is important in becoming self-sufficient. Some of the STI clients have used the time in the program to pursue additional certifications while others have made the efforts to obtain their GED or high school diploma. Out of the 18 STI clients enrolled in the program at our agency: 4 obtained full time employment, 4 obtained part-time employment, 5 are participating in employment training and 5 are not yet employed. One client who has overcome tremendous mental health and substance abuse issues attended a first-time home buyer's program orientation yesterday and is well on her way to owning her own home. For those clients who are not as close to obtaining independent housing, they have still benefited by learning other skills necessary for self sufficiency. Many have learned money management,

parenting skills, and important information with regard to maintaining housing. In addition, the program has allowed many families battling substance abuse and mental health issues to gain stability. There are no prerequisites for participation in STI except a family's tenure in a publicly funded emergency program. Therefore, the clients in the STI program are presented with a variety of service needs that require continued funding. Should our funding for this program decrease, this will limit our capacity to provide transportation assistance, utility assistance, assistance for maintenance, as well as assistance with obtaining employment via funds for obtaining background checks, CPR trainings, and licensure exam fees to our STI clients. In addition, with the decrease in benefits for TANF recipients, the STI program will become that much more essential, as it will continue to provide housing for our most vulnerable families. The argument has been made time and time again that more funding is needed; however, when I sat in this room in the audience a couple weeks ago, the question was asked as to whether more could be done with the funds we do currently receive. It has been my experience that yes there are in fact more creative ways that we can use the existing money that is allocated for programs such as the STI. Instead of providing our clients with utility assistance, why not require that each family in the program be on a special payment plan with PEPCO and Washington Gas in which their bill is the same each month? I have witnessed that the STI program is providing our families with the tools to become self-sufficient and with the right adjustments it has the potential to be even more successful. Thank you Chairperson Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services.