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**TESTIMONY OF
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**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
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**BILL 18-1059
HOMELESS SERVICES REFORM
AMENDMENT ACT OF 2010**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Matthew Fraidin, and I am a professor at the University of the District of Columbia School of Law, and a Visiting Professor at Georgetown University Law Center in 2010-11.

Mr. Chairman, you asked me last spring to lead a fact finding investigation into the conditions of children at D.C. General Hospital. Your charge to me reflects your deep commitment to the children and families of the District, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve in this manner.

Along with Georgetown law students, I spoke with children and parents living at D.C. General. In all, we made approximately 10 visits throughout the summer. I am here today to share my observations.

This bill's proposed elimination of the "apartment-style requirement" would permit the creation of new facilities like D.C. General. Children and parents raised concerns about a range of issues, however, that should be considered before creating new D.C. General-type facilities.

For example, a 10-year old boy, who said he likes school and that his favorite subject is math, expressed worry that there is no place for him to do his homework at D.C. General. The same little boy said he can't have his school friends over, because he lives in the shelter, and can't play with other children who live in the shelter because they always have to be quiet and are not allowed to visit in each other's rooms.

The mother of two girls said "all of the kids who live here are afraid, and they are suffering. They have to be quiet all the time, they can't play in the hallways, but it is not safe to play outside with all the smoking and drinking and prison discharges going on."

Children and parents pointed out that because there is no outdoor play area, outside play is limited to bare dirt and gravel. One mother said "An onsite facility would allow the kids to play in a safer surrounding that is not cement or blacktop."

Other concerns relate to food. For example, a mother expressed concerns we heard repeatedly. She said "we have no access to a fridge, and little kids need to snack! There are women here with babies, or with diabetes, and they can't get access to bottles and food in the fridge afterhours."

The same woman informed us that "it is so hard to get mail here that sometimes people's medical cards get returned."

Another parent said "it would be better if they had at least one bathtub on each floor for children that are not old enough to get in the shower. Right now, residents must wash younger children in the bathroom sinks."

Many residents said they simply cannot eat the food provided at the shelter. One woman said she and her daughters all got food poisoning during the first week they lived there.

Many children are kept in the rooms to avoid residents who are smoking, drinking, cursing, fighting, and using drugs.

Numerous people confirmed that elevators are frequently out of service. One woman told me that she carried her baby – *in his stroller* -- up five flights of stairs. Her friend said “It’s lucky I was there that time, so I could carry her groceries for her.” Another woman said a mother and child had been caught in a broken elevator for 30 or 45 minutes.

The mother of three little children said the shelter has mice, flies, and scabies, even though she is “always cleaning.” Another mother said her “one-year old baby’s hand was caught in a snap trap.”

In one interview, I learned that a family had been separated due to conditions at the shelter. The heat in the shelter was so severe that one woman brought her child to a grandmother’s house, where the child had been living without her mother.

In short, Mr. Chairman, D.C. General is not an appropriate place for children to live. There are real and significant concerns about food, health, safety, school, and social development. D.C. General is, of course, a hospital building, with long, hallways and dozens of closed doors leading to rooms housing families. The physical similarity to a cellblock is haunting, as is the institution’s understandable need to impose a host of rules designed to maintain order. I am deeply concerned that warehousing children in congregate facilities conditions children to accept institutional living as the norm.

In addition, children need to understand their parents as figures of guidance, authority, and strength. When an institution, such as D.C. General, creates the rules, such as those relating to food, mobility, visitors, and privacy, parents’ influence is correspondingly narrowed. This can diminish parents in the eyes of their children, harming children’s social and emotional development.

Budget pressures are hard to resist in these times. The voices of children and parents at D.C. General, however, make it clear that removing the apartment-style requirement will harm children. We know that insufficient attention to children’s needs actually costs money in the long run, while costing the children a chance at a productive and happy life. Many policy questions are susceptible of multiple understandings and a range of reasonable choices. On this one, however, there is no way to argue that *more* communal care will be good for children. The children and parents whom we met speak with one voice, which says that we should move toward *closing* D.C. General, rather than housing more and more children in institutions.

Thank you.