

Bowser's 2023 budget prioritizes unhoused people

A domestic violence survivor was living at N Street Village's Diane's House when she learned that her abuser, recently released from prison, was near her new home.

She was forced to leave Diane's House for a domestic violence intake center. D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser's (D) new budget proposal could help her move into safe permanent housing.

Bowser's budget proposal includes funding \$1.1 million for a pilot program to provide rental assistance for those at risk of violence. The proposal earmarks \$31 million for Homeward DC for housing vouchers and services for 500 individuals and 260 families. If her proposal is approved, it could be instrumental for ending chronic homelessness for more than 2,300 people in D.C.



Muriel Bowser introduced her budget proposal at a council breakfast on March 16. (Alice Berry)

The Way Home Campaign, a group dedicated to ending chronic homelessness in D.C., pushed Bowser to invest at least \$26 million for permanent housing vouchers. The Way Home Campaign declined an interview request.

The 2023 budget proposal indicates that the city is prioritizing unhoused people, Thomason said.

“Budgeting shows priority,” Thomason said. The rental assistance for people at risk of violence would help the 39% of women they serve who-experienced domestic violence.

Even with permanent housing vouchers, barriers to housing remain.

Buildings are overseen by property management teams, “which have requirements such as, hey, you cannot have an extensive criminal record, Hey, your credit has to be at a certain level,” Thomason said. Unhoused people often have poor credit if they have access to credit at all.

Government needs to invest on multiple fronts to house people, said Nechama Masliansky, a senior advocacy advisor at So Others Might Eat, which provides aid to people experiencing homelessness.

“You need a source for capital assistance so you can buy the land and renovate buildings or build them from scratch if you have to and you need a rent subsidy,” Masliansky said.

Permanent housing vouchers are a rent subsidy, but affordable housing units are lacking.

“We need an investment of \$100 million a year over a 10-year period, just to start making up the gap of where we are, because D.C. had lost 30,000 units that were \$500 to \$750 a month,” Masliansky said.

Some advocates want money allocated to help provide wraparound services that can help keep people housed. Health assessments would allow organizations like N Street Villages to better take care of the people they serve.

“We get folks with extensive needs, with limited mobility, with complex mental and or medical health concerns. Those issues are interacting with each other and they need some on-site support,” Thomason said. Because N Street Village only gets funding for case management services, they can only offer referrals to women needing those services.

“DMHHS sees our success as keeping women housed. We see our success as helping people to live in a community,” Thomason said.

Utility arrears, which are a kind of grant to cover the costs of electricity, water and gas, could also help people facing homelessness, said Kate Coventry, a senior policy analyst at D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute.

“There are some urgent needs, particularly around the pandemic. We would recommend adding funds for utility arrears,” Coventry said.

Still, advocates said the budget proposal shows a commitment to helping unhoused people.

“You budget for what you care about. This would allow us to continue our mission,” Thomason said.

D.C. Council will hold hearings on the budget before proposing its own modifications. It has not announced when it will vote on a final budget.