

**TESTIMONY OF JENNY REED, POLICY ANALYST
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**For the Public Roundtable on
PR 17-1175, “Sense of the Council in Support of Reducing Poverty in the District of
Columbia Resolution of 2008”
December 11, 2008**

Councilmember Barry, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on PR 17-1175, the “Sense of the Council in Support of Reducing Poverty in the District of Columbia Resolution of 2008.” My name is Jenny Reed, and I am a Policy Analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on policies that affect low- and moderate-income residents.

Thank you for taking the initiative to call together community members from a wide variety of organizations to work on a comprehensive and holistic set of recommendations for reducing poverty in the District. As you are well aware, poverty is a problem here. The District has a particularly high poverty rate with just over 17 percent of DC residents and over one-fourth of DC’s children currently living in poverty.¹ Unfortunately, the number of individuals and families that fall into poverty will likely increase in 2008 and 2009 — given the current economic recession — unless steps are taken to address this pressing social problem.

Making a priority in the FY 2010 budget of programs that help people move out of and stay out of poverty is an excellent first step. The community recommendations that you worked to gather address a wide range of important areas such as: housing, child care, ex-offender re-entry, and low-income tax relief, to name just a few. In addition to adequately funding key programs and services for low-income residents, the District should also establish mechanisms that can help address the long-term systemic changes needed to alleviate poverty in DC.

Across the nation, a number of states and cities have adopted poverty reduction targets and/or established poverty commissions to both set a vision and produce a comprehensive plan for reducing poverty.²

Establishing a poverty reduction target makes an explicit commitment to reduce poverty and sets a goal that is easy to understand. The shared numerical goal and timeline can help to carry the commitment through the project. We applaud you for introducing PR17-746, the “Sense of the Council in Support of Reducing Poverty in the District of Columbia Resolution of 2008” which called for one-third reduction of poverty in the District over 5 years. We hope that you will continue to call for a poverty reduction target in the new Council session.

¹ DCFPI analysis of American Community Survey data from 2006 and 2007.

² States and cities with targets and/or commissions includes: Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Milwaukee, (WI), New York, (NY), and Providence, (RI).

A poverty reduction target puts the whole government on notice that poverty reduction is important. A poverty commission, which most jurisdictions simultaneously create when establishing a target, can provide the vehicle to put into motion the steps needed to meet the target.

While many government agencies serve low-income residents, no single agency is responsible for reducing poverty in most jurisdictions. Yet addressing poverty often requires the action of several agencies' working together. By thinking holistically, poverty commissions can develop wide-ranging recommendations and comprehensive strategies to reduce poverty. Commissions can identify proven methods to reduce poverty, and areas where expansions of existing programs are warranted. Poverty commissions also can identify programs that are not performing well, or areas where greater coordination among agencies is needed. In some instances, poverty reduction targets also lead jurisdictions to develop pilot programs to test new, creative solutions to address poverty.

The District currently has a poverty commission; however, it is not fully staffed and will expire on December 31, 2008. We hope that the Council will re-introduce legislation in the upcoming session to extend the commission and allow it carry out its important work of developing a comprehensive plan to reduce poverty in the District.

With a high poverty rate in the District and difficult economic times ahead, the time to act is now. We thank you for your work in bringing together community members to develop a priority list of recommendations that will work to reduce poverty in the FY 2010 budget. We hope to continue to work with you in the upcoming year on steps that can be taken to further reduce poverty in the District.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony, please feel free to contact me with any questions.