

## **Residents and Advocates Express Mixed Feelings on DCHA Communication and Leadership in September Meeting**

Salmoncain Smith-Shomade | News Reporter

Tuesday, Sep. 24, 2024

D.C. public housing residents and advocates complained about a lack of communication from the District of Columbia Housing Authority at a recent meeting, repeating [a pattern of concerns](#) from earlier discussions.

While some advocates thanked the DCHA board for their service, public housing residents expressed disappointment with the response times and execution of various DCHA services during the Sept. 11 Board of Commissioners meeting. The DCHA, with 11 board commissioners and 16 senior team members, serves [50,000 customers](#) or approximately [30,000 households](#) with “traditional affordable housing, tenant and project-based housing vouchers and mixed-income properties.”

Vivian Mercer, a resident of the Henson Ridge townhomes, said she has continually suffered from black mold growing in her public housing unit since 2022 and cannot move because she cannot upgrade her in-house public housing voucher to a [Section 8 voucher](#). (A Section 8 voucher would permit Mercer to move into any D.C. public housing space that meets the same standards and pricing as her original unit.)

“The mold that’s in my unit was first discovered in 2021. I didn’t know what it was. I was just having trouble breathing in my bedroom,” she said. “After that happened, they brought this huge machine to put in the floor of my place, which was supposed to clear the air ... but that didn’t help.”

Mercer said she received additional maintenance on two or three other occasions, but every year the mold continued to resurface. She requested a move but said her in-house voucher only allows her to move within the complex, and all the other units are full.

Other residents voiced concerns about the long response times, and one resident even sought an apology from the board. Still, a few advocates praised the board for their current work.

Rachelle Ellison is a public housing advocate, international speaker and assistant director for the People for Fairness Coalition, a nonprofit organization that advocates for D.C.’s underserved and unhoused population.

She said the Housing Authority is doing an “amazing job,” especially with its limited resources.

“The D.C. Housing Authority has done their absolute best. I can call them. They literally pick up the phone and not ignore our calls and talk and try to help you with solutions,” Ellison said in a phone interview.

“I am so grateful to the D.C. Housing Authority as it is now because (DCHA Executive Director) Keith Pettigrew and (DCHA Housing Choice Voucher Program Director) Anton Shaw were the best things (that) could have happened to the ... D.C. Housing Authority. A lot of people don't realize that or understand that because they haven't got to experience them firsthand in person,” she said.

Ellison said a previous DCHA administration under former director Brenda Donald did not have the same dedication to supporting residents.

“The entire time she (Donald) was the director of the D.C. Housing Authority, there was no movement on the (housing voucher) waiting list ... She never showed up to public events ... but Director Pettigrew or Director Shaw are throwing events in every ward,” Ellison said. “Donald gave herself a \$30,000 raise when the unhoused population was rising and homelessness was rising, you know, and it was a mess... She (Donald) gave them (Pettigrew and Shaw) a Housing Authority that was in disarray.”

Robert Warren is the People for Fairness Coalition director.

Warren said the D.C. government's mismanagement of DCHA “has been well-documented,” in a phone interview.

“So we've been advocating, you know, for them (DCHA) to be able to have the money basically to rebuild the public housing infrastructure here in the District of Columbia," he said. "We feel like District residents are being economically discriminated against when it comes to their ability to access housing that's affordable, sustainable and accessible.”

Peter Tatian, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and research director for Urban-Greater DC, provided context to Washington D.C. public housing management.

“D.C., a few years ago, got criticized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for not really doing a good job of determining whether apartments were reasonable in terms of the rent and in cases (where people were) paying rents that were too high,” he said in a phone interview.

In 2022, a Washington Post article covered a report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on the DCHA, which showed deficiencies in leadership and mismanagement of the organization.

Attempts to contact a spokesperson from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development about the report were unsuccessful.

Tatian said public housing is largely controlled by Congress and the federal government, but D.C. allocates resources to the area. He explained DCHA functions on a limited budget for its

programs, meaning there's only a limited offering of public housing for thousands of residents-in-need.

“So, you get put on a waiting list and you have to wait until either a public housing unit becomes available or a voucher becomes available or more money is put in the voucher program. And that can be years ... so it's a very frustrating process for many people who have a lot of really deep need,” Tatian said.