



Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
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Washington, DC 20004

Janeese Lewis George
Councilmember, Ward 4

Committee Member

Human Services
Labor and Workforce Development
Recreation, Libraries and Youth Affairs
Transportation and the Environment
Special Committee, COVID-19 Recovery

July 13, 2021

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor, District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Mayor Bowser:

We write to express concerns and share recommendations regarding the promotion of the Stronger Together by Assisting You (STAY DC) program. As you know, STAY DC covers rental and utility arrears by paying landlords and utility services directly. In doing this, the program helps residents clear debt, stay housed, and alleviate toxic stress associated with financial hardship. But the program can only support those who know about it. The federal law requires that the District have a plan for prioritizing assistance to renters earning less than 50% of the area median income and households where at least one member was unemployed for 90 or more days. The Council has not seen such a plan. With eviction protections being phased out this fall, the public outreach elements of STAY DC are more urgent than ever.

We are grateful STAY DC is beginning to pay out more claims and more quickly, and that the agencies implementing STAY DC continue to remain responsive to programmatic and technical improvements from the Council and public. It is now time to ensure the promotional and personalized application assistance needs of the program receive the same level attention and improvements as the IT and claims processing components; again, these investments in improvements are only impactful if people know to apply. To that end, we write with the following requests:

- 1. By Friday, July 23, 2021 provide the Council (1) the federally required plan detailing how the District is meeting its obligation to prioritize based on income and/or unemployment status and (2) a detailed promotion and outreach plan for STAY DC from launch through September 30, 2021, at a minimum.** Specifically, please share a plan that details:

- The strategies, tactics, and resources that will be deployed to increase broad public awareness of STAY DC and the targeted promotion and outreach activities and resources that are currently being or will be deployed.
- Details about direct application assistance available through these outreach events.
- The communication mediums, community partnerships, and contracted services that are being or will be used to meet public outreach and application assistance goals, and the expected reach of each of the strategies.

2. Beginning Friday, July 23, 2021, and biweekly thereafter, include updates on STAY DC promotion and application assistance efforts as part of the existing Department of Human Services biweekly reports to the Human Services Committee. Reporting must include a list of recent and upcoming events, a brief event description, a point of contact for the event, the location (site, address, and Ward), how it is/was publicized, the number of people engaged per completed event, and how many received personalized application assistance vs. general program information.

3. Significantly increase targeted outreach to residents who are most likely to be eligible for STAY DC assistance. Beneficiaries of DC public assistance programs should be contacted in their preferred language by email, letters, texts, and /or calls to ensure they are aware of STAY DC and have the personalized support needed to apply. Outreach should prioritize the following residents:

- Any resident who received unemployment insurance benefits for any part of 2020 or 2021
- Any resident currently enrolled in any District public benefit program such as TANF, SNAP, WIC, LIHEAP, UDP, CAP, Medicaid, Alliance, disability assistance programs, or others
- Any resident who has received funds through ERAP or other rental assistance programs in the past three years.
- Any excluded worker who applied for DC CARES funds (promotion to these individuals may need to occur in partnership with DC CARES grant partners)

Further, promotion of STAY DC to individuals receiving targeted outreach should more heavily advertise the availability of coverage for three months of forthcoming rent, and should encourage tenants to apply for those funds no matter their current arrears situation. Promoting this relief in particular – but also all funding from STAY DC – using raw dollar amounts could also help tenants better understand the tangible benefits of applying for rent and utility assistance from STAY DC.

4. Thoroughly engage applicants before issuing any STAY DC denial notices for missing documentation. We must be laser focused on “getting to yes” for every possible application that comes into the STAY DC system. Any time an applicant is determined to be missing a core document from their application, the following steps should be taken to remedy the situation before moving any denials forward: phone or video call conversations with the individual to explain the needed documentation and how to remedy their applications by uploading or submitting materials to the STAY DC portal or to an authorized individual working for STAY DC, at least three contact attempts by the preferred methods listed on the

application to explain missing documentation and provide a direct point of contact for the applicant to follow up with. Prior to denials becoming final, STAY DC should work diligently with each applicant to ensure they are approved to receive at least three months of rental assistance utilizing self-attestation allowances.

- 5. Commit to organizing and facilitating three (3) in-person application assistance events per week through September 30, 2021.** Good work has been done to make the STAY DC application portal more user-friendly but the federal documentation requirements are inevitably burdensome to tenants who are low-income, have had informal work or living arrangements, may have limited literacy or computer access, or have any other number of challenges occurring in their life right now. Having a helping hand who is familiar with the system and is committed to “getting to yes” for each tenant will result in more tenants out of debt, and getting landlords and utilities the money they are owed. We implore you to establish these regular clinics using the recommendations included in this letter’s addendum.

STAY DC has the potential to be a lifeline to thousands of District residents – who are overwhelmingly Black and brown, and who were likely in financial distress even before the pandemic – as we work together to build back better. We look forward to working collaboratively with your administration to ensure STAY DC is set up to succeed in assisting all our residents with the rental assistance they and their landlords need to be made whole. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

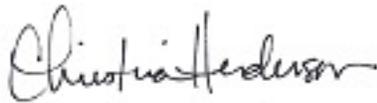
Sincerely,



Councilmember Janeese Lewis George
Ward 4



Councilmember Brianne Nadeau
Ward 1



Councilmember Christina Henderson
At-Large



Councilmember Robert White, Jr.
At-Large



Councilmember Brooke Pinto
Ward 2



Councilmember Trayon White, Sr.
Ward 8



Councilmember Elissa Silverman
At-Large

ADDENDUM: STAY DC Application Clinics

Recommendations for ensuring clinics meet the needs of tenants and landlords so more applications are submitted, and submitted fully and accurately, before eviction protection phase outs begin:

Staffing:

- Clinics should provide sufficient staffing for individualized assistance to attendees with starting and updating applications, uploading documentation to the portal, remediating denials, and otherwise helping tenants – and interested landlords – in completing online applications for STAY DC.
- All clinics should be staffed with at least one person who is fluent in Spanish and able to assist with application submissions; this person should be a paid member of the clinic team, not a community volunteer

Timing:

- Each clinic should last at three hours to give sufficient time for drop ins, and because we hear from constituents and tenant organizing community groups that this is how long it takes to complete an application even with assistance.
- At least one clinic per week should begin after 6 pm to accommodate tenants working traditional daytime hours.
- At least one clinic per week should occur during a weekend day.
- Clinics should be promoted with at least two-weeks' notice, or as soon as practicable, and Ward Councilmembers should be notified of events in their Ward with at least two weeks' notice, or as soon as practicable, to develop joint promotional and turnout strategies.

Location:

- Clinics should prioritize Wards and neighborhoods with higher percentages of lower-income households, but at least one clinic should be held in each Ward each month through Sept. 30th
- Clinics should be held in locations convenient to a large volume of tenants likely to be eligible for STAY DC assistance, such as large apartment buildings in lower income neighborhoods or at neighborhood libraries in communities with high percentages of renters
- Clinics locations should strive to be accessible by public transit
- At least one clinic per month should be held at a location like a public library that can provide document scanning services to tenants
- All locations should be fully ADA accessible

General considerations:

- Clinics should be promoted with clear, but non-threatening language encouraging tenants to bring all possible documentation with them and linking to the STAY DC explainer list of documentation
- At least one clinic per week should provide child care services to parents, and such child care availability must be clearly promoted in advance of that particular clinic event
- Clinics must provide computers or other electronic devices for completing applications as well as free internet for applicants to connect to
- All print materials at clinics must be compliant with language access
- Ensure all applicants attending a clinic are made aware of other financial relief resources available to them through programs like ERAP, utility assistance, rental payment plans, public benefits, etc.
- For some, a virtual platform might be more accessible or conducive, so at least one clinic per month should be hosted virtually on a platform that allows for breakout rooms so tenants can still receive private, individualized assistance