



February 6, 2023

The Honorable Muriel Bowser  
Mayor of Washington, D.C.

The Honorable Wayne Turnage  
Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services

The Honorable Laura Zeilinger  
Director, Department of Human Services

Dear Mayor Bowser, Deputy Mayor Turnage and Director Zeilinger:

As national organizations joined together in the fight against homelessness and as members of this community, [the National Coalition for Housing Justice](#) **strongly urges you to immediately halt the plans for forced removal without a plan for housing the 70 residents** now living outside at McPherson Square, and to refrain from sweeping people or their belongings from that site.

The National Coalition for Housing Justice (NCHJ) is a group of national organizations aligned behind housing justice in order to end homelessness. Our vision of housing justice guarantees opportunities for everyone in our country to have affordable, safe, accessible, stable housing. We take an approach grounded in racial justice, economic justice, and equity for all who have been marginalized or minoritized.

It is with great concern that we write this letter to you about the closing of the encampment at McPherson Square. The newly announced closing date is a **full two months** before the previously posted date and provides only 2 weeks' notice for service providers and encampment residents – a time frame under which the District government and its contractors lack the capacity to connect residents of McPherson Square to interim or permanent housing and that falls in hypothermia season when the weather is most dangerous.

Some of the residents of McPherson Square came from other encampments closed by the District and were not connected to housing and services, while others are in desperate need of medical or behavioral health care. Some have had negative experiences with the homelessness system or shelters and lack trust or a belief that anyone cares about them. Many have been subjected to brutality and violence. This all disproportionately harms Black, Indigenous, and people of color and causes striking racial disparities among those experiencing homelessness. For example, Black people represent [45 percent](#) of the general population of the District of Columbia, but they account for [93 percent](#) of people experiencing homelessness. All are in need of safe and affordable permanent housing and/or access to safe interim housing. Our information as of February 2 indicates that D.C. officials claim only 15 of the 70+ people who live in the park have been connected to housing assistance. However, we have concerns over the accuracy of that number and it is unclear whether that is immediate assistance as we know there are systemic barriers to identifying a unit and receiving services even for those individuals within the next 10 days.

Several of our member organizations are headquartered in the District, including downtown near McPherson Square. Many of us walk through the park on a regular basis and have formed relationships with some of the residents there. We are aware of the concerns raised by the business community about the encampment.

The plan for closure is not only cruel for the residents of the park, but it does not reflect the approaches that we know work, nor does it serve the larger purpose of ending homelessness for McPherson residents or for the District overall. In fact, it will likely only amplify ongoing challenges by increasing distrust in the system by the community, people experiencing homelessness, and the service providers who do the hard work of providing outreach, shelter and rehousing services to vulnerable populations. A poorly planned and executed encampment closure will only disperse the group to other areas of the city, make it harder for service providers to connect with them, and result in a loss of personal possessions needed to access housing by those subject to the sweep.

Moving the date of the sweep alone will not solve the issues raised by the residents of McPherson Square, service providers, or the business community. We must work together to model – in our nation’s capital – what it means to humanely and equitably address unsheltered homelessness without the use of a law enforcement response. We acknowledge that other encampment sweeps have occurred and continue to happen. Addressing the encampment in McPherson Square on federal property in a way that is aligned with the Biden Administration’s recently released *Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* can be an example for cities and states across the country of how we should approach this work.

In the spirit of partnership, our member organizations – including the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Funders Together to End Homelessness and others – would like to work with your Administration and the appropriate federal agencies to develop a plan of action. Specifically, we are offering **to hold a convening (at our expense) by Friday, February 10 that brings together local and national experts, service providers, McPherson Square residents, funders (including philanthropy), government and other stakeholders to identify the steps necessary to rehouse the residents of McPherson Square** and that can serve as a model for other encampments in the District. We understand that you have housing resources available for this purpose, but other issues within the system create barriers to utilizing those vouchers effectively or quickly. We hope that you will accept our offer to find an alternative to the planned sweep. If so, we will work with you to develop an agenda and hold the meeting as quickly as possible.

We are also [sending a letter](#) to the Chair, Vice Chair and other members of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness to urge the National Park Service not to participate in this sweep, as it is not aligned with the *Federal Strategic Plan*.

As a courtesy we are also informing you via this letter that many of our member organizations, including our staff, plan to be present in protest should the sweep go forward as currently scheduled on February 15. That said, we strongly prefer the option of working together.

The District has done positive work to end homelessness, and some of us have recognized the work of your Administration and the District’s non-profit community as a model for others. This action would be a step backwards, and we sincerely hope that we can work with you to find an alternative that meets the needs of all District residents including those who are unhoused.

No one should be forced to live in the conditions present in McPherson Square. Unsheltered homelessness is a stain on our nation that reflects the failure of our systems to meet the needs of people when they need help the most. Conducting a sweep in this manner only blocks from the White House will only deepen that stain.

Please reach out to Ann Oliva, CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness ([aoliva@naeh.org](mailto:aoliva@naeh.org)) or Amanda Andere, CEO of Funders Together to End Homelessness ([amanda@funderstogether.org](mailto:amanda@funderstogether.org)) to discuss how we might proceed.

Sincerely,

National Coalition for Housing Justice

*\*\*Members of the National Coalition for Housing Justice include:*

A Way Home America  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities  
Community Solutions  
CSH  
Funders Together to End Homelessness  
Housing Justice Collective  
National Alliance to End Homelessness  
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans  
National Coalition for the Homeless  
National Health Care for the Homeless Council  
National Homelessness Law Center  
National Low Income Housing Coalition  
True Colors United  
Youth Collaboratory