

March 9, 2021

The Honorable Vincent C. Gray Councilmember, Ward 7  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 406  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Councilmember Gray:

As members of the community who believe that we all have a responsibility to offer support and guidance to those who have fallen on difficult times, we are deeply troubled to hear that you are organizing an effort among your colleagues on the city council that could result in a disruption to emergency shelter and vital social services for dozens of families experiencing homelessness at a time of unprecedented uncertainty and economic hardship. We are referring to the resolution you have introduced that aims to terminate the current service provider's contract to run the short-term housing program at The Horizon in Ward 7.

As you may know, The Horizon is part of Mayor Bowser's bold plan to establish dignified, service-enriched programs across all eight wards – a centerpiece of her agenda. At The Horizon's opening in October 2018, Mayor Bowser [said](#), "With these new short-term family housing programs, we are providing a chance for our families to rebuild their circumstance as they continue to contribute to our greater DC community."

By all accounts, the existing provider operating The Horizon, CORE DC, has been an ideal partner to the community in making that vision a reality. In fact, it is our understanding that CORE DC was selected to lead a similar short-term housing program in the District, which opened in July of 2020, as well as another DHS program for returning citizens.

At The Horizon, CORE DC provides 35 families experiencing homelessness with safe emergency shelter, case management, and community-based support programs to help them achieve stable and permanent housing. The site also includes computer labs for the residents, outdoor playground and recreational space, age-appropriate indoor recreation space, a homework and a study lounge for residents. Residents of The Horizon are predominantly Black and Brown, and CORE DC's staff reflects the populations it serves, which is a critical component of building trust.

The effort to dismantle this program is troubling enough on its own. But it is even worse in light of the fact that you have openly – and at times inexplicably – taken a hostile stance against CORE DC regarding the organization's plans to open another facility in Ward 7, a residential reentry center for returning citizens.

In short, it appears that you have embarked on this ill-advised campaign to oppose CORE DC's operation of The Horizon to pressure CORE DC to abandon its entirely unrelated plans for a residential reentry center. It seems that what you are doing amounts to legislative blackmail. We hope that this is not the case.

The residential reentry center in question would be the city's only support program for men returning from prison. And such a facility is desperately needed. In fact, this was a top priority included in recent recommendations [published](#) by returning citizens and advocates who were part of the District Task Force on Jails & Justice in partnership with the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Reentry Network of Returning Citizens.

Thus far, the reasons for your opposition are far from clear and, frankly, baffling to many of us. CORE DC's strong record in the District is well known. What could be the justification to suddenly terminate the organization's contract? Moreover, this eleventh-hour effort to generate opposition to the reentry center project raises many questions.

Specifically, we understand that a major supporter of yours, Cedar Realty Trust, has its own designs for the area and for the site at 3701 Benning Rd. NE that CORE DC has selected for its reentry center, with approval from DHS. We also understand that the COO of Cedar Realty Trust was among the few chosen to serve on your economic development committee for Ward 7.

CORE DC has sought to answer important community questions and address seemingly contrived issues like the effort to petition the Historic Preservation Review Board to designate 3701 Benning Rd. NE as a historic landmark and, therefore, unusable to CORE DC. Not surprisingly, the Historic Preservation Review Board categorically rejected the petition to designate historic status to this plot of land, on which there once stood a crumbling slaughterhouse that caused environmental concerns among the community.

We want to be clear: the effort you are organizing has homeless families with newborns and young children concerned about fate of the program they depend on day in and day out. They are being left to wonder whether their lives will be uprooted. Additionally, this political maneuver jeopardizes The Horizon's staff, who have worked on the front lines amid the ongoing public health crisis to ensure continuity of care.

We respectfully ask you to, at a minimum, explain your motivations for your disapproval resolution. Beyond that, we request that you consider withdrawing this resolution, which would ultimately damage the District's momentum towards providing better social services to its most vulnerable residents.

Sincerely,

Reverend Graylan Scott Hagler, Senior Minister  
Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

Parisa Norouzi, Executive Director  
Empower DC

Reverend Dr. Wanda Thompson

Reverend Dr. Lewis T. Tait, Jr, Pastor/Teacher  
The Village

Reverend Patricia Hailes Fears, Pastor  
Fellowship Baptist Church

Reverend Dr. Edwin L. Jones, Sr.  
Family Focus 911

Taylor Nuevelle, Executive Director  
Who Speaks for Me

Graylin W. Presbury  
DC Federation of Civic Associations

Deacon William Taylor,  
Plymouth UCC

Dr. Rhone Fraser,  
Historian

Aida Fitzgerald  
Ward 7 Resident

Hanna M Treyo, Board Member  
Who Speaks for Me

Reginald Black  
People for Fairness Coalition

Reverend Clarence Cross  
African Methodist Episcopal Church

Virginia A. Spatz  
Community Thru Covid  
We Act Radio

Abdushshahid Luqman  
Luqman Nation

Nia Shaw

Reverend Dr. Raymond Bell, Pastor  
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Rabbi Charles Feinberg  
Executive Director  
Interfaith Action for Human Rights

Bishop Bernardo Snipes,  
The Center for Racial Equity and Justice

Reverend George C. Gilbert, Jr.,  
Holy Trinity United Baptist Church

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Holy Trinity United Baptist Church

Reverend Frank Tucker,  
First Baptist Church  
Facilitator, Wednesday Clergy Fellowship

Reverend Kenneth H. King  
New Hope Baptist United Church of Christ