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Statement for the Record

**Bill 16-387, "Commission on Poverty in the
District of Columbia Establishment Act of 2005"**

submitted to the Committee on Human Services

**by Angela Jones Hackley
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Mr. Fenty and members of the Committee on Human Services, I am Angela Jones Hackley, Executive Director at DC Action for Children (DC ACT), the city's only multi-issue advocacy organization dedicated to improving conditions for children, youth and their families. DC ACT's mission is: to publicize, organize and educate in order to improve conditions for children, youth and their families in the District of Columbia.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to comment on Bill 16-387, "Commission on Poverty in the District of Columbia Establishment Act of 2005." As you know, DC Action for Children has long called on the District government to address the prevalence of poverty in a real, meaningful, comprehensive and urgent way. Our interest is in ensuring that the legislation would be one vehicle to reduce poverty and that the issue of poverty be an essential element of the public discourse about the present and future of the District of Columbia.

Our other interest, naturally, is in how this commission can help reduce poverty amongst children. As you well know, poverty among children and youth in the District of Columbia is all too common. Even when families with children leave poverty, they are often leading lives similar to when they lived below the Federal Poverty Line. Too few families with children leave poverty for self sufficiency. This is both a short- and long-term problem for individuals, families and communities. Too, it is a problem for the poor and not poor. The reduction in poverty – by moving people out of poverty rather than out of the city – would be a major accomplishment morally and economically for the District of Columbia. Absent a concerted approach to reducing – and even eradicating – poverty, we fear that the mayor's plan to increase the city's population will result in a stable single class and a poor child class.

This legislation has already served to elevate the issue as never before; following the public hearing on November 9, commentators on WAMU's DC

This should be about wealth generation replacing poverty. Moving people from below the poverty line to \$1 above poverty makes no difference in living conditions for individuals and families in the city. Doubling, tripling their income will make a significant difference. This should be our goal.

Politics Hour discussed the pros and cons of a poverty commission. Too, articles appeared in numerous local papers.

DC Action for Children supports any idea that elevates the issue of poverty and that serves to reduce poverty. Should the poverty commission serve that purpose, then we are supportive. We have some concerns that the poverty commission described in the legislation will not be able to accomplish all that is needed to eradicate poverty. We would like to propose, then, a number of changes that we believe would strengthen the commission and make real the goal of eliminating poverty.

DC ACT's recommendations are:

1. *Change the composition of the commission:* DC Action for Children wholeheartedly endorses the active and purposeful inclusion of residents who are affected by poverty on the commission. We would expand non-impooverished members, however, so that the range of poverty-related policy expertise can be brought to the table. The expertise we suggest be on the commission includes: affordable housing, economic development/planning/transportation, education, immigrant populations, families with children, and employment and training.

We believe this expertise should be in the form of members rather than consultants, advisors or invited guests/speakers precisely because the functions as outlined in the legislation are complex and technical and thus require such experience on a regular basis.

Furthermore, we strongly support adding language to the legislation that would enable an employee of a DC-based organization, when the employee is not a District resident, to be a member of the commission. There is a wide range of experts who can contribute to the city's anti-poverty effort if only they were allowed to serve on the commission based on their organization's "home" and not their personal home.

Finally, we urge you to include a Board of Education member, and perhaps a representative from the State Education Office, as permanent members of the commission. Including those responsible for schools recognizes the accountability challenge and actively includes DC Public Schools in efforts to reduce – and we would suggest eliminate – poverty in the District of

Columbia. Their inclusion specifically recognizes the employment challenges in the District of Columbia and surrounding communities where there is a mismatch of individual skills and job requirements. Only by improving educational outcomes and expanding opportunities, such as vocational education for our young people, will the city be in a position to make significant inroads on the employment front.

2. *Redefine "poverty"*: Given the range of income eligibility requirements for public benefits, we believe that sticking to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) does not truly reflect the state of poverty and income insecurity in the District. We suggest, therefore, that the income limit be capped at 250% of the FPL in order to be consistent with health expansion legislation currently before the Council of the District of Columbia. Certainly, there could be a requirement that a specific proportion of the commission's members be at or below a percentage, say 150%, of the FPL in order to ensure that members represent the most poor.

As those who use public benefits know too well, there are a number of issues related to program coordination and ease of access that should be considered by the poverty commission should the legislation be approved.

The table below details the assistance programs available in the District. The table includes income eligibility caps.

Public Benefits Programs and Income-Eligibility Requirements

Public Benefit Program	Income Requirement as Percentage of FPL
TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; welfare)	100%
Food Stamps	130%
Child Care Subsidy Program	250% to enter/cap is 300%
Medicaid	100% (with exceptions)
S-CHIP	200%
DC Health Care Alliance	200%
After Care for All (a component of the Child Care Subsidy Program)	250% to enter/cap is 300%
LIHEAP	146%
DC Earned Income Tax Credit (DC EITC)	~200%

3. *Specifically include work on the issues of "concentrated poverty" and child poverty as functions of the commission:* There is no debate that poverty is disproportionately prevalent east of the Anacostia River. The systems and infrastructure challenges east of the river differ from those in the rest of the city; for this reason, it is imperative that the commission be required to address this issue.

We would also suggest that child poverty be a particular focus of the commission. As you may know, the District is the only jurisdiction in the country where child poverty grew over the last ten years, and that the child poverty rate is now at alarming rate of over 30%. Again in areas east of the Anacostia River, that figure rises to 50%.

4. *Staffing requirements are too stringent:* We are concerned that limiting all staff to those in poverty or recently in poverty will limit the pool of otherwise qualified applicants. The work of the commission, as described in the legislation, will require skills and talents that may not be present in those who are in poverty. Note that we are not equating poverty with capability, interest, commitment or passion. At the same time, we know that a majority of those on TANF, as a subset of those who are poor, have poor educational attainment and skills, both of which are necessary to the success of the commission and its work. We strongly suggest that the committee find an alternative to the current language that recognizes the skills and knowledge that are required to achieve the commission's goals. All of this said, we believe that a balance must be struck to ensure that the staff are able to successfully work with the appointed members of the commission.
5. *More specificity is needed on the commission's role in the development of agency budgets:* We question the timing of the "review and comment" function as related to the mayor's budget submission. Currently, only executive branch agencies participate in budget development and review. Our question to the committee is, "Will the poverty commission be part of the agency submission teams, budget review teams or some other formal

mechanism to comment and weigh in on submissions and the mayor's proposed budget prior to public release?" If not, the language must be clarified such that it is clear that comments are made after the mayor's budget is made public.

6. *Miscellaneous technical comments:* We have a few technical problems with the legislation as written. First, one of the functions is to "develop policy." The question is "Will an agency be required to adopt policy developed by the commission?" While the legislation does not say that implementation is required, the inclusion sets up a false sense of authority of the commission.

Another technical issue is that the chair of the commission is empowered to obligate resources of the commission. We believe that as an appointee and not an employee of the government, the chair cannot obligate city funds. We strongly recommend that this be changed so that the Executive Director is the only position that can obligate District funds.

A third technical issue is the fiscal impact of this legislation. Certainly, before a Council vote, this information is required. But we suggest that the fiscal impact statement should be available for review by the community prior to the mark-up of the legislation and well before the first full Council vote.

A fourth issue is a question about what "the office of Budget and Management Systems" refers to (related to the appointment of the Executive Director). We believe this is just a mistake, but as such, it should be corrected.

Finally, although in no way the least important of our concerns, is that this commission, without the complete commitment of the city's elected officials and particularly the mayor, will not have the desired results. Because the commission has no authority, it necessarily relies on the legislative power of the City Council and the operational and policy power of the mayor. We believe that the community, including elected and appointed officials, must come together to attack poverty in the District of Columbia.

This cannot be legislated but it must be addressed if the commission is to be successful and poverty reduced.

Thank you for providing the opportunity for public comment on this important piece of legislation. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Or, contact Susie Cambria, Director of Public Policy, at 234-9404 or scambria@dckids.org.