

Sounds From the Street: DHS Director Laura Zeilinger on Affordable Housing

Laura Zeilinger

I just always was taught and felt like and really believe that our opportunity that each of us have on this earth is to leave the world a better place than we found it. For me, it's really about alleviating pain and suffering and really helping people have the opportunities that I've been lucky to have to really explore their own potential.

Adam Kampe

That's director of DCs Department of Human Services, Laura Zeilinger. And this is Sounds From the Street. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Typically in the show, we meet men and women suffering from homelessness. But more and more we'll get to meet people dedicated creating economic opportunities for those experiencing homelessness beyond the scope of the nonprofit Media Center Street Sense—and who better than Laura Zeilinger? Before being appointed Director of the Department of Human Services by Mayor Bowser in 2014, Laura Zeilinger served as the executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness. In addition to 19 federal departments and agencies, Laura worked with partners in every sector—state, local, nonprofit and private—to spearhead a massive effort called Opening Doors, a federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. Laura is an attorney, a triathlete, a wife, and a mother. I met Laura in her office earlier this fall, to learn about her work and the district's plan to end homelessness.

Laura Zeilinger

The Department of Human Services is really an agency in the District of Columbia that supports people who have a variety of social and economic needs to get their basic needs met, so that they can have the opportunity to improve the income and their household, their economic security. So we, certainly we have a mission statement that's a lot more concise than that. But I really when I said to our team when I started, and the way I really think about our work, is that we're on a social justice mission here in the Department of Human Services. We know there's a lot of disparity in the District of Columbia, and that shows up geographically, it shows up demographically, and that in a city that is thriving and growing the way that ours is, there are people who are longtime residents who have been left out of that growth. So the opportunity that we have here at the Department is to help people have access to the supports that they need, so that they have the opportunity to access the opportunity and growth that is in our community. So our mission is really around doing that, around helping people with cash assistance, with supplemental nutrition assistance, or food stamps, and making sure they have medical care that they have a safe, stable place that is home. And one of my core beliefs is that if you don't have those basic needs met, your ability to somehow get a job is completely unrealistic. So we need to help people get their basic needs met and get access to things they will need to be able to pursue their dreams.

Adam Kampe

And for years, you've been committed, very passionate, about issues surrounding poverty and low income families. What initially drew you to this world?

Laura Zeilinger

Quite honestly, my upbringing— it's a value that my parents, my family, instilled in me from the very beginning. In Judaism, I'm Jewish, there's a something called tikkun olam, which means "rebuilding the world." And for me, that's really about people in the amount of pain and suffering that there is out there in the world that is really unnecessary. So that's always been what drives me. I think we all have passion for some people, it's their art, for some people, it's innovation and business. And for me, it's really about, it's really about that— it's about alleviating pain and suffering and really helping people. And so that's what drives me. And it's been, you know, I've done a lot of different things in the career I've had so far, but I think that's been the common thread for me.

So I was here actually DHS during Mayor Fenty, his term in office as Deputy Director of program operations and, and we did a lot of work on homelessness. We launched the housing first initiative, we invested very heavily in permanent supportive housing. We helped 1000s of individuals and families exit homelessness directly into housing with the housing first approach, and we were seeing some really exciting results that got some national recognition. So when the mayor left office, and I was looking at what to do next, I was approached by the Obama administration to join the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, which is a really small federal agency that a lot of people don't even know exists, whose job it is to coordinate the federal response to homelessness. So it works across 19 Federal agencies and with stakeholders and the private sector and with state and city leaders on solutions to homelessness. There's a federal strategic plan that has, I think the probably the most publicized and well known goal is the goal of ending homelessness among veterans by the end of this year by the end of 2015. As well as sets out ambitious goals on ending chronic homelessness, ending homelessness for families, youth and children, and really doing the kinds of systems change work to get to a place where homelessness is rare, brief and non recurring for all individuals in this great country of ours. I didn't come in as executive director, I came in over the national initiatives team really at that bridge between the national work that was happening at the federal policy level and states and communities. So I had the opportunity to travel the country to hear about what states and communities were doing to try to understand how we could, at the federal level, use the resources and programs better, and take away the barriers that states and communities had to using the resources effectively on solutions to homelessness and sharing best practices. And I absolutely loved that work. The mayor called me very shortly after she was elected and approached me about coming back to work in the district. At first and was very flattered and honored that she called me, not necessarily looking to leave what I was doing in the administration. But I became really convinced by her passion and commitment around the things that I really care about the we talked about, and most importantly, closing the opportunity gap here in the District of Columbia. So I felt like this is the time is really now to come in at the ground floor of an administration, help shape the policies and the budget, and finally, do I think what needs to be done here in my hometown, to really realize some of those really important objectives. So I made the jump.

Adam Kampe

One thing that is getting some buzz and that people who are involved in this issue are kind of excited about is the mayor's policy, or pledge to end homelessness in DC. Can you talk about what that is? What pledges?

Laura Zeilinger

Sure. So there's a strategic plan called Homeward DC. And that is a plan that really looks at what are we trying to do and to end homelessness in the district, it sets out some sort of modeled after opening doors, the Federal strategic plan to prevent an end homelessness, both population specific goals, as well as work around what it would take to change the crisis response system. What happens for people when they experience homelessness in the district? What are the housing investments and solutions that we

would need to realize all of the different goals in the plan? What do we need to do around access to employment and education to realize the goals? So Homeward DC really both sets that vision and the goals and lays out the strategies that we need in order to achieve those goals. There's a pledge that the mayor is asking people to sign just residents and community to say I'm part of this effort on ending homelessness. And it's really, while we have goals in the plan that are about all populations, and we are doing a lot of work for a crisis. It's not about we're going to first focus on families. And then we're going to focus on people who are unsheltered. And then in people who are chronically homeless, we need to be able to walk and chew gum and really do many things at once. But the pledge is really more of a focus on what we're trying to do on family homelessness, we're working to close DC general, it's not a good place for families to get shelter and services and the supports they need to exit homelessness. It's what we have. And we certainly the people who work there, do the best that they possibly can within the conditions, as do the residents and guests who are there a DC General, but that's not what it should look like where people should have to come when they're experiencing homelessness. And it's not what kids should have to live for years. So the mayor is very committed to closing DC general. But we I think learned a hard lesson, way back when we had a large scale congregate family shelter that was DC village, that when we close a shelter like that, even if we're making huge investments in housing and solutions, we still need to have enough emergency capacity to meet the need. And so we will close DC general when we are able to do that. And we have resources that the mayor put into our budget to create small community based shelters throughout the District of Columbia. And she's asking residents to really be a part of that with her. And so part of the pledge is saying I want the district to end homelessness for families. I support that goal. And I'm want to be a part of that. I think it is helpful because as we move forward with the next work, which is the hard work of helping people understand that shelter programs can be good neighbors, and some people may feel like that is going to change their community in ways that they might find unwelcome. But they support that they want us to close DC general and do things we want people to understand there's a connection between the two and to think about how they're really going to be part of the solution. So part of it is just helping people make that connection that this is I can't say not here, not near me. But yes, we do think this is something you should do, because we want to be in all eight wards of the district.

Adam Kampe

So one thing that really struck me about the pledge is bullet that said, When everyone has stable and safe housing, we all benefit. Why is that?

Laura Zeilinger

It's true in many different ways. And people have different orientations about what it means to benefit, right. So economically, we benefit, we know that it costs more money in taxpayer dollars and public dollars to serve people while they're experiencing homelessness than it does to provide them the supports they need to be in housing.

Adam Kampe

Okay, in case you missed that fact, here it is, again:

Laura Zeilinger

We know that it costs more money in taxpayer dollars and public dollars to serve people while they're experiencing homelessness than it does to provide them the supports, they need to be in housing. So we'd benefit economically, in terms of just the bottom line in the budget. We benefit, because I think no matter whether people believe that others are deserving, or not deserving, they are not comfortable, nor do they want to have to walk out of their doors or their businesses and see that there are people

who are sitting there and experiencing homelessness, and that is where they're, that is the only place they have to be. They don't want to see people on the streets, whether it's out of you know, compassion for those folks in their humanity, or whether it's just because they don't like the way it looks, you know, people don't want to see that. So we all I think and feel good when when people are not there because they've been locked up in jail, or they've been forced out to a place that's just not visible. But when they're in housing. And when people are in housing, they thrive. These are folks who have an enormous amount of potential, and they've experienced some really tough stuff that's put them where they are. But with the stability of housing, people do amazing things, things that they never thought possible for themselves and things that others may not have imagined possible for them. And everybody should have that opportunity. So, so we all benefit when people are noticing.

Adam Kampe

If you could wave a wand you'd one wish for, I guess your hometown, I didn't realize that the nation's capitol is your hometown, or the nation, regarding this issue, what would it be?

Laura Zeilinger

There are two things. One, we need affordable housing. We really need to increase the supply of affordable housing and communities. We have a homeless problem because we don't have enough housing that people can afford. And that's fundamental. So the most important thing that we can do to get ahead of this problem tactically, when you break it down is the affordable housing piece of that. So that's one I think the other which is more, I think theoretical or philosophical is I really just want people to remember all of the time, but for the grace of God go I that frustrating as it is, the behaviors that can be associated with people when they are experiencing homelessness. Don't make those folks bad people. But it tends to the frustration about that doesn't bring out the best in neighbors and people and I just would like everybody to remember the humanity of folks who are in that really difficult situation they're in when they experience homelessness, and in be part of the solution.

Adam Kampe

That was advocate and Director of the Department of Human Services, or DHS, Laura Zeilinger. You can learn more about DHS and Laura at [DHS.dc.gov](https://www.dhs.gov). And to learn more about Street Sense, DC's nonprofit media center who produces this podcast, go to street-sense.org. And to hear more Sounds From the Street, check out [street-sense.org slash audio](https://street-sense.org/audio) or find us on Soundcloud or the podcast app Stitcher. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter at Street Sense DC. The sounds from the street theme song "I need \$1 how to make it in America" performed by Aloe Blacc from the album "Good Things," used courtesy of Stones Throw Records. The song was composed by Aloe Blacc with Leon Michaels, Nick Motion, and Jeff Dynamite, used by permission of songs of Cobalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music slash Sony ATV. Excerpts of the following used courtesy of Creative Commons and found on WFM Free Music Archive: "In paler skies" by Blue Dot Sessions from the album "Arrow Knot" and from the Needle Drop Company: "For land for love for time," "people like you," and "piano hymn" composed and performed by Weinland from the instrumental album, "Breaks in the Sun," and "Got to keep moving" by the Losers from the album "starting over." Just about to call 2015 wrap. We'll be back in 2016 with the executive director of Street Sense, Brian Carome. Hope everyone has a wonderful new year and yeah, until then.