



# A LOVING COMMUNITY

GLAA Policy Brief 2024

GLAA



*GLAA is an all-volunteer, non-partisan organization of D.C. residents committed to advocating for equality and liberation for LGBTQ and affiliated communities in our city, and remains the oldest continuously active political LGBTQ rights group in the country.*

## A Loving Community: GLAA 2024 Policy Brief

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## FUND OUR FUTURES

Fundamental to fiscal policy is the belief that the [government's investment](#) in its community are dollars well spent. The investments that we support in this Policy Brief draw on priorities of the District's grassroots movements. If enacted in full, these investments can save hundreds, even thousands, of lives, for tens of millions of dollars.

The District Government's predictions of decreased tax revenue in 2023 gave the Mayor cause to seek out places for budgetary reductions. Yet, after 3 years of record inflation, the city's human services agencies are paying [up to 28% more](#) for the same basket of goods. Our dedicated human services providers are struggling on reduced budgets, with [government grants being cut](#) as we finalize this brief, while corporations enjoy record profits and the District's [wealth disparity remains](#) one of the highest in the country.

The inequality in the economic recovery is why we support the Fair Tax proposal put forward by the [Just Recovery DC Coalition](#), urging the Mayor and the D.C. Council to pay for investments by raising

revenue through taxing the concentrated wealth in the District.

The Urban Institute reported that in 2020 [D.C. invested more per capita on police than any other U.S. jurisdiction](#). Our police force is well-resourced. Yet, [crime feels rampant](#) and vulnerable District residents report that interacting with Metropolitan Police Department is [often traumatic and destabilizing](#) and [officers avoid serious consequences for misconduct](#). Instead of further investments in incarceration, D.C. should invest in systems of care.

Throughout our Policy Brief we are invited to respond to crises with care and to go upstream to invest in low-income housing and decriminalization as crime prevention at the source. When it comes to solving problems of poverty, we require a more thoughtful approach that reduces the despairing conditions that drive crime by supporting a future where we all belong. A loving community is one that prioritizes the needs of poor and vulnerable LGBTQ people.

## Invest in harm reduction and overdose prevention services to save lives

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The overdose crisis in the District ravages our communities—in 2022, 461 people died of overdoses (the final number for 2023 is not available, but likely to exceed that). The [escalating deaths](#) are a call to courage for the Mayor and Council. After years of failed prohibition policies, we must support a [harm reduction](#) approach. Harm reduction is an evidence-based, patient-centered, and proven approach to reducing overdose deaths and supporting healing from substance use disorder. GLAA supports the request for \$15 million from the \$80 million Opioid Settlement Fund to be allocated to the Department of Behavioral Health for funding two 24/7 harm reduction centers, that would include a safe drug consumption component, mobile outreach vehicles, and drug checking services. Participants would also receive health care, counseling, and referrals to health and social services, including long-term drug treatment and housing. These centers would provide participants with hot food, showers, meditation and other holistic healing

opportunities, job-training services, and other elements that can improve the health and wellness of participants and the communities where the facilities are located.

These centers would build on the success of D.C.'s [first stabilization center](#) by providing intensive outreach, more services, and medically supervised drug consumption. Over 100 peer-reviewed [studies](#) have consistently demonstrated the positive impacts of these services including: decreased rates of HIV and Hepatitis C, increased entry into substance abuse treatment programs, reduced costs for emergency medical services, and reduced overdose death rates. Although D.C.'s strategic plans to combat opioid deaths over the past five years have consistently mentioned overdose prevention centers as a part of the solution, the failure of the government to advance on this goal is a missed opportunity to implement a crucial evidence-based practice that would save lives.



# Increase the pipeline of licensed mental health care workers and fund crisis response and community-based behavioral health and mental health services to prevent crises

D.C. should invest in a system of crisis response interventions that do not rely on policing. According to the [2022 Household Pulse Survey](#), 49% of adults in the District of Columbia who reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder reported needing counseling or therapy but not receiving it in the past four weeks, compared to the U.S. average of 28.2%. The District must do more to address the lack of providers, and its consequences. D.C. must increase investments in these critical services and comprehensive outreach to connect people to services.

The Mayor and Council should also find creative ways to increase the pipeline of professionals, such as by passing and funding the [Social Work License Modernization Amendment Act of 2023](#). Investments in health care professional loan repayment programs should be continued and increased.

Local organizations face continuous issues in getting licensed social workers to help D.C.'s vulnerable populations. The social worker licensure exam has been shown to have glaring [disparities in passage rates](#), particularly for Black social workers. The [proposed bill](#) would remove the exam requirement for people who complete a Bachelor's or Master's degree in social work in order to end the discriminatory and arbitrary

exam requirement that only keeps people from entering the field after spending years in school to be a social worker. Programs such as the recently passed law creating a [free Master of Social Work program](#) is a substantial step to continue the progress that is severely needed.

Additionally, the District should invest in unarmed models of [crisis response](#) such as case management services, co-responder teams, the crisis intervention team model, EMS- and ambulance-based responses, and mobile crisis teams. Responders should be well-resourced to be able to respond in minutes, and be culturally competent to understand the needs of the people they serve.

Moments of crisis destabilize already vulnerable people. Investments in existing community-based services can promote stability and resilience in our communities. Community-based mental health services include non-hospital settings for stabilization and recovery from crisis, including respite care and observational units. Providing investments to new community-based behavioral health and mental health services can expand the sources of trusted, culturally competent, and local providers for D.C. residents, while relieving the burden on more resource-demanding care, like hospital emergency rooms and intensive care units.



## Budget sufficiently to fulfill the promise of non-discrimination laws

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D.C. has some of the strongest nondiscrimination protections in the country, but their enforcement has not always been consistent. Until recently, the Office of Human Rights (OHR), the primary enforcer of the city's nondiscrimination laws, struggled in part due to inadequate funding. Following years of advocacy from LGBTQ, civil rights, and legal organizations, the D.C. Council significantly increased the agency's [budget](#) to address the case backlog by adding more staff positions for its investigations teams and to

expand its community education and outreach. [Since 2022](#), the OHR has made significant progress in hiring, resulting in improvements in managing its caseload in an efficient and timely manner. OHR must be sufficiently staffed to fulfill its responsibilities to enforce the District's robust human rights framework. The Mayor and Council must avoid cutting OHR positions, including those that still need to be filled, and ensure new laws requiring OHR implementation are adequately funded.





# DECRIMINALIZE OUR LIVES

Support the full decriminalization of sex work for adults, including the selling and purchasing of sex and third-party involvement not involving fraud, violence, or coercion

Currently, D.C. criminalizes prostitution as a misdemeanor and penalizes first offenders with up to 90 days in jail and a fine up to \$500. Those re-arrested are penalized with sentences up to two years in jail and a fine up to \$12,500. As with the enforcement of other criminal laws, these arrests and fines disproportionately affect Black people, according to data from the D.C. Sentencing Commission from 2019-2021. In 2019, the D.C. Council held a hearing on a bill which would have removed penalties for sex workers and other consenting adults while continuing to prohibit human trafficking or forcing people into the sex trade against their will. The District must pass a similar bill to remove criminal penalties for consenting adult commercial sex. [The United Nations Human Rights Council](#), the [World Health Organization](#), [UNAIDS](#), [Amnesty International](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#) have stated that criminalizing adult consensual sex is incompatible with the human right to personal autonomy and privacy.

Criminalization of sex work harms sex workers by making them [targets of violence and stigma](#) from the community and the police. Enforcement of D.C.'s prostitution laws is costly for the District, corrupts the Metropolitan Police Department, and ultimately degrades public safety by diverting resources from needed social support to ineffective policing. These issues are worse for Black and brown, indigenous, transgender, and immigrant sex workers, who live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Decriminalization allows sex workers to better organize for their own safety, and it reduces violence and the transmission of HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

It is crucial to decriminalize not simply the selling of sexual services, but the buying of sexual services and third-party support as well. Criminalizing the purchasing of services means the interaction [remains policed](#). Sex workers also report the importance of being able to work



with others for safety. In places which have criminalized the buying of sexual services and third-party involvement, sex workers report challenges doing essential screening of clients, placing sex workers in [difficult and dangerous situations](#). This makes sex work more dangerous and makes sex workers more vulnerable to

abuse than they would be under a model of full decriminalization.

Ultimately, outside of situations of exploitation or violence, criminalizing sex work is a crime of morality, and we as trans and queer people know all about that.

## Remove the criminal penalties for drug possession for personal use and increase investments in health services

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Despite drug use rates being similar across social groups, the poor and communities of color are disproportionately targeted by the criminal legal system for punishment for drug possession. Consequently, the criminalization is not about the punishment of drug use but punishing people of color and poor communities. Additionally, evidence demonstrates criminalization has [done little](#) to curb the prevalence of drugs in our communities and is not an effective way of getting people into treatment.

D.C. needs a drug policy that makes the lives and health of residents the top priority. The removal of criminal penalties for the possession of drugs for personal use and stronger investments in health services are proven and compassionate solutions [supported by over 80%](#) of D.C. residents, including over 70% of who reported they would be more likely to vote for candidates who embraced drug decriminalization. As the

[DecrimPovertyDC](#) Coalition advocates, the decriminalization of drug possession can help reduce overdose deaths, increase community support for addressing addiction, and destigmatize drug users. The decriminalization of drug possession is rooted in the philosophy of harm reduction and community wellness that has been successfully implemented around the world since the 1970s. Recognizing the harms of criminalization, the D.C. Council decriminalized possession of drug paraphernalia for personal use in 2020. Evidence from jurisdictions that have decriminalized the personal possession and consumption of drugs reveals a dramatic reduction in drug-related deaths and HIV transmission. Sadly, the Mayor and Council are moving in the wrong direction on this policy front by proposing ineffective and likely unconstitutional temporary "[Drug Free Zones](#)," the authorization for which was wisely repealed in 2014.



## Fully implement police and jail oversight and record sealing legislation

In 2022 D.C. passed important legislation to improve oversight of our jails and police, but both bills remain only partially effective due to lack of funding. Similarly, legislation to overhaul our criminal record sealing process—one of the most [restrictive and complicated](#) in the nation—will not go into effect until 2029 for lack of funding.

The Council passed the [Corrections Oversight Improvement Omnibus Amendment Act of 2022](#) after revelations of terrible conditions at D.C. jails, which also have a history of mistreating trans residents. The bill expanded the oversight powers and responsibilities of the Corrections Information Council and the D.C. Auditor, but those portions of the bill remain unfunded and therefore inapplicable until the Mayor and Council appropriate sufficient funds—roughly \$585,000 for fiscal year 2025.


Likewise, the [Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act of 2022](#) enhanced oversight of law enforcement in D.C., including some recommendations of the Police Reform Commission and reforms initially passed in 2020 in response to the outpouring of public support for greater accountability in the wake of high profile police killings. However, portions of the law which strengthened the Police Complaints Board

and Office of Police Complaints, and increased transparency of police misconduct records, will not become effective until funds are allocated by the Mayor and Council, roughly \$1.25 million for fiscal year 2025. Disturbingly, the Mayor and Council considered [reversing some of those reforms](#) before they have even become effective.

Finally, the [Second Chance Amendment of 2022](#) makes critical improvements to D.C.'s record sealing process. Despite the critical need to overhaul this archaic process and allow residents to seal their records, the bill is not slated to become effective until 2026, with certain provisions delayed until 2029, leaving thousands of people without relief for two to eight years. Approximately \$2.6 million is necessary to make the promise of reform accessible to people sooner than 2029. On February 6, 2024, the Council took an important step to move up the effective date of certain provisions of this law, in the [Secure DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2024](#), but the full promise of record sealing reform must be realized as soon as possible.

The disproportionate likelihood of LGBTQ people being incarcerated, victims of police misconduct, and having criminal records makes the full implementation of these laws urgent.





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# SOCIALIZE OUR HOUSING

## Embrace housing as a human right

The right to quality affordable housing is fundamental to our well-being as human beings and is critical in ensuring a sense of safety and security in the world. Unfortunately, despite existing housing discrimination protections and affordable housing programs, residents, including those who are LGBTQ, face [increasing difficulty](#) to find and keep safe, quality, and affordable housing. Across the District, residents are struggling to make ends meet and being pushed out of the communities they love. The costs of home ownership are increasing and landlords keep raising rents at rates faster than wage increases, and as other costs of living continue to rise. The recently held [LGBTQ Housing Summit](#) in November 2023 revealed that housing affordability remains a top issue for our community.

When factoring in race, the problem is even worse. A long history of [racist housing policies and practices in the District](#) have contributed to a significant racial wealth gap. In D.C. the homeownership rate for Black residents is 35%

and 50% for white non-Hispanic residents.

Home prices and rents will continue to go up as corporations and individuals pursue higher returns on their real estate investments. Additionally, government subsidies for housing via vouchers will get more expensive as the city keeps up with market rates to cover rent for poor residents. These rising costs will make it harder to spend D.C. funds on other critical programs and more difficult to provide housing vouchers for everyone who needs them. The significant rise in housing costs also means residents don't get to reap the benefits of efforts to put more money in their pockets, including minimum wage increases and [cash assistance programs](#). People's incomes are being consumed by skyrocketing housing costs.

While GLAA supports utilizing existing programs, such as LGBTQ housing vouchers and transitional housing, to address LGBTQ residents' housing needs today, we believe our community should not concentrate its vision on limited solutions. For every LGBTQ resident and family we support

through these programs, many more are not getting the same needs addressed. Rainbow bandaids to these structural problems won't ultimately address the needs of LGBTQ poor communities. We need systemic changes that would benefit everyone.

The current system pits neighbors against each other in the endless pursuit of increasing property value. We must stop making profit the priority.

We don't have to accept this inhumane system that was given to us.

Thankfully, the [D.C. Green New Deal for Housing](#) (GND) offers us a way out. The GND takes a social housing approach, disrupting the failed market-focused approach. Since social housing relies less on the market it allows more affordability. The GND also prioritizes locations with easy access to public transportation and more units for families of four. Under the social housing model, D.C. would own the buildings and new buildings would have to be constructed with union labor. Buildings would be mixed income: tiered so that a third of the units are deeply affordable, the other third is affordable and the last tier is market rate. Revenue from market rate units would be used to ensure social housing stock is well-maintained and financially sustainable.

Revenue in excess of maintenance costs can be used to expand affordability or help fund additional social housing. As more social housing is created, rents are expected to go down because the supply is increased. This bill establishes a new agency to manage the construction and maintenance of the units. It also mandates a tenant board that manages and has decision-making authority. And it is environmentally friendly. In addition to focusing on transportation-friendly housing, the GND requires units to be retrofitted with solar panels and install electric instead of gas stoves to support a greener D.C.

GLAA is a member of the Green New Deal for D.C. Coalition, because we understand stable and affordable housing, better paying jobs, and a more green D.C. are critical for the well-being of LGBTQ residents.

Housing should be about supporting individuals and families and fostering community. We should reject a system that exploits our human need for housing to make some people richer at the expense of many. The current system is not producing the results we need, and is leaving too many people behind.

At the end of the day, we all just want a place to call home and belong to a loving community.

