January 3, 2022

Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority Board of Commissioners, Mayor Stoney, Members of City Council, and Richmond School Board:

We are writing with serious concern regarding recent media reports regarding RRHA's plans to resume enforcement of lease provisions this month, which potentially could lead to the eviction of up to 900 families this year for non-payment of rent.

Richmond Public Schools students and teachers are already under extraordinary strain due to mitigating the harm from the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to teach and learn. The fallout from mass evictions on this scale would land disproportionately upon RPS teachers, staff, social workers, and administrators. RPS staff will, by necessity, be tasked with managing the tremendous disruption caused by the sudden dislocation of children from their homes and communities.

Further, the City of Richmond has identified reduction of evictions as a major policy priority in recent years, in addition to the related steps of adopting an Equity Agenda, declaring that racism is a public health crisis, and establishing the significant reduction of poverty in Richmond as an ongoing policy goal and supporting a city agency (Office of Community Wealth Building) charged with leading that effort.

These laudable commitments should be matched with appropriate, real-time action steps, even when they require collaboration across multiple entities, to prevent eviction, bolster household stability, and support the physical safety, social-emotional thriving, and academic learning of children.

RPS has demonstrated a commitment to supporting the social and emotional development of PreK-12 students through programs that support resiliency, with a focus on training teachers and staff to recognize adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). It is well-established that eviction is one of the most traumatizing adverse childhood experiences. While eviction of a family in the middle of the school year would clearly be profoundly traumatic for the children involved, the eviction of dozens–let alone hundreds–of children would send shock waves through RPS, severely stressing the ability of our school system to deliver high quality instruction. To be clear, allowing even one child to endure this entirely preventable stressor is unacceptable.

We appreciate that outreach steps have already been taken to enroll RHHA residents in available rental assistance programs and that the housing authority has committed not to evict anyone participating actively in such programs.

However, we believe even more assertive steps are necessary to avert a major crisis.

First, **Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority should declare immediately that no household with a Richmond Public School student shall be evicted for reason of non-payment of rent prior to the end of the current school year**: that is, at no time between now and June 30th, 2022.

Secondly, **RRHA, the City of Richmond, and Richmond Public Schools should develop by no later than January 31 a collaborative, actionable plan to assure that all public housing residents with schoolchildren are reached and enrolled in available rental assistance programs**. RRHA has listed outreach steps it has already taken, but should request additional resource support and coordination from the City and RPS to achieve 100% enrollment. For instance, the Office of Community Wealth Building Community Ambassadors might be enlisted to assist with outreach efforts, and efforts to reach families at risk of eviction through school-based contact and outreach should be launched. Families should be provided information regarding how to avoid eviction as well as related resources and programs available to help residents with education, training and job placement. At the same time, RRHA should thoroughly and proactively explore the possibility of applying for rental assistance on behalf of all its residents. In short, the City, RPS, and RRHA should all treat this situation as an urgent crisis.

Third, **the City of Richmond should work with philanthropic partners to establish, no later than March 31, a community fund for the purpose of assisting families with payment of owed rent accrued during the pandemic**. The City's planned use of American Rescue Plan dollars includes funds for direct assistance to individuals in need, and we believe philanthropic entities could identify and designate additional resources for this purpose.

We believe this coordinated approach gives us the best chance of assuring that every resident is fully supported in avoiding evictions, addressing rent obligations, and taking full advantage of opportunities available to them.

We believe that housing is a human right, and that evicting children during a global pandemic, during the winter, in the midst of their school year, would be a tragedy

unbefitting our city's aspirations and stated commitments to equity. We can and must do better.

By this letter, we request that Mayor Stoney, Richmond City Council, and Richmond School Board take all appropriate steps to support this course of action. We also strongly encourage City administration to offer its services in partnership with the Housing Authority.

Most importantly, we ask that the RRHA Board establish an unambiguous policy that no family with kids shall be evicted during the current academic year.

Thank you for your consideration; we will be following up in the near future to assess progress as relates to the concerns expressed in this letter.

Sincerely,

Beth Almore
Thad Williamson

Cc: Stacey Daniels-Fayson, Interim CEO, RRHA
Lincoln Saunders, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Richmond
Reggie Gordon, DCAO of Human Services, City of Richmond
Jason Kamras, Superintendent, Richmond Public Schools