

## Appropriations Budget Hearing

On Governor's proposed Mid-term Budget Adjustments for FY2021

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

Friday, February 21st, 2020

Submitted by Richard Porth, United Way of Connecticut

Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, Representative Lavielle, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on the important investments the state is making through the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to support efforts to end homelessness in Connecticut. My name is Richard Porth and I serve as the CEO of United Way of Connecticut.

Governor Lamont's proposed budget provides funding for critical housing and homelessness services and supports. Thanks to the leadership from the Governor and the Department of Housing and the ongoing support of the legislature, Connecticut continues to lead the nation in efforts to end homelessness – saving lives and saving tax dollars.

United Way of Connecticut strongly supports funding in the budget for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line at \$23 million.

In addition, we agree with others who have submitted testimony that there is a critical need for a new targeted investment of \$1 million in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line to pair support services with rental assistance and improve housing stability, income and employment, health and wellness issues, and enhance connections to community resources.

In addition, we concur with others that additional funding for enhanced outreach services (\$375,000) be included in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line item to enable us to better identify individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. This capacity is extremely limited at present, leaving people outside and vulnerable to severe and unsafe conditions.

Connecticut's continued success in fighting homelessness is due to the state's investment in efforts to end homelessness and to create more affordable housing. Connecticut's success is also the direct result of a system built upon the collective effort of government agencies, numerous nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, housing advocates and housing providers. Through this public-private collaboration, we have demonstrated that government can tackle big problems like homelessness and achieve unprecedented success.

Connecticut United Ways and Connecticut 2-1-1 share the belief that everyone deserves a place to call home. In 2014, 2-1-1 Connecticut became the front door for Connecticut's Coordinated Access Network (CAN). Coordinated Access helps people who are homeless or imminently homeless access community resources within seven regions, aimed at fulfilling the federal HEARTH Act's goals of: 1) avoiding homelessness whenever possible; 2) minimizing the length of

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stay in shelter; and 3) preventing the need to re-enter shelter after leaving. This is accomplished through collaboration among many community and state and local government partners under state leadership.

The state's innovative leadership and its investment in ending homelessness through the Coordinated Access Network System has made Connecticut a national leader:

- Connecticut was recognized in 2016 by the federal government as one of the first two states in the nation to end chronic homelessness among Veterans.
- Investments are working: numbers of those experiencing homelessness are going down year after year. Connecticut has seen a 66% reduction in chronic homelessness since 2016.
- In 2019, 2-1-1 answered 93,402 calls from people in need of housing services, many of whom were facing imminent risk of homelessness. 2-1-1 Contact Specialists provided assistance to help many of these callers with diversion strategies aimed at keeping them in their homes by linking them to utility assistance, basic needs assistance, financial assistance and other supports.

All of you who have had a hand in these achievements deserve much credit. Now, the challenge is to sustain this great achievement. We have learned that we can do this AND at the same time save tax payer dollars.

Homelessness is an unacceptable condition for any Connecticut resident, and an expensive public policy challenge. We urge you to support the proposed investments in frontline homeless services, supportive housing, and support services that save public resources and help families and individuals transition to housing, stability, and hope. The Coordinated Access Networks (CAN) system (including emergency shelters, rapid re-housing, the 2-1-1 housing unit, and community level coordination) are the linchpins of the homeless response system and critical to maintaining our progress in ending homelessness.

2-1-1 is proud to be partners with the state, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, dozens of shelter providers and public and nonprofit agencies, and the Partnership for Strong Communities in this crucial work to end homelessness. We respectfully request that the state continue its investment in Connecticut's Coordinated Access system which has helped many Connecticut residents avoid homelessness, avoided the need for much costlier interventions, and made Connecticut a national leader in fighting homelessness.

Thank you for your continued commitment to addressing homelessness in Connecticut. It is the right thing to do, good for our people, good for our communities and good for Connecticut.