

Appropriations Budget Hearing
On Governor's proposed Mid-term Budget Adjustments for FY2021
Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
Friday, February 21, 2020

Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, Representative Lavielle, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for hearing my testimony today on the important investments through the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to support efforts to end homelessness in Connecticut.

My name is Kelly Fitzgerald and I am the Greater New Haven CAN Director, based out of United Way of Greater New Haven. I am also a resident of Hamden, so the work that I do everyday is more than just a job but a way for me to improve my community and my vision for my community and our state is that we make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the investments and hard work that Connecticut has accomplished to address the important and expensive problem of homelessness. You have invested in proven solutions to homelessness and it is necessary to continue our progress and ensure that every youth, family, and individual has a stable place to call home. 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 Greater New Haven, we have built a network of agencies from within the homelessness system and beyond to create innovative pathways for people out of homelessness.

But, new homelessness continues to happen every day. Greater New Haven met with more than 2,900 households last fiscal year who were seeking homeless services. It is not a static problem - we still have far too many people in crisis and becoming homeless. The opportunity here is that we know what works - Connecticut was recognized in 2016 by the federal government as one of the first two states in the nation to end homelessness among Veterans- we just need stable and increased funding to address the current needs in each community.

This legislative session we are supportive of the enacted budget for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line at \$23 million. In addition, there's a critical need for a new targeted investment of \$1 million at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line to pair support services with the rental assistance and improve housing stability, income and employment, health and wellness issues, and enhance connections to community resources. In a statewide meeting just this week, partners came together to discuss the barriers that lead to someone becoming housing unstable after being housed- all of the responses were connected to a household not having access to a case manager or support person that can guide them through moments that many of us handle without hesitation. Currently, we have over 150 highly vulnerable individuals housed without case management services due to lack of capacity. While not all of them

believe they need support services, we also know that we serve one of the hardest populations that truly need wrap-around services to be successful in maintaining their housing. Ideally, Greater New Haven would love to see everyone in a permanent supportive housing program attached to a case manager whether they engage or not, so they have a support provider when needed. However, due to current limitations of case management providers, contract limitations due to engagement and high demand of turn-around with staff in these agencies we often face barriers in this area.

In addition, providing enhanced outreach services at \$375,000 at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Housing Supports and Services line would 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. In the absence of this funding, Greater New Haven has been engaging formal and informal outreach partners such as police departments, libraries and food pantries. These partners help to engage clients who are living outside, but we know that added investment in this area will allow us to have the necessary staff to build trusted relationships with these clients and support them back into housing where they are safe.

One example, we have recently- but there are many with similar stories- is a man who was sleeping outside in New Haven. He was very visible in the community, often panhandling, physically unkempt, eating out of trash cans. He was very ill and was living in a dug-up hole behind a gas station, near the train tracks. His living condition was so deplorable, he became infected from rat bites. After multiple attempts to get him connected into case management services by various agencies and services, a local Recovery Coach, began to address his health conditions. He later agreed to participate in substance abuse treatment and accepted shelter at the Columbus House. She began the process of connecting him to housing resources, and he qualified for a specific housing intervention due to his medical condition. He has been successfully housed since December 1st. One note that he wrote describing his experience has stuck with me when he wrote: "It's my first day of freedom." He continues to be connected with case management services and often checks in with his Recovery Coach.

Lastly, the Governor has also included an expansion of \$3 million in funding for community placements for individuals at Connecticut Valley Hospital to support those who are ready for discharge back into their communities. Funding for these community-based options for housing and support services is critical for the state to prevent people from languishing in an institution or exiting the system and becoming chronically homeless. This investment is fundamental to our efforts to make homelessness rare, brief and one-time by 2023.

Homelessness is an unacceptable condition for any Connecticut resident, and an expensive public policy problem. 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.

Thank you for hearing my testimony and thank you for your support to efforts to end homelessness in Connecticut.

Sincerely,

Kelly Fitzgerald
Greater New Haven CAN Director
United Way of Greater New Haven