



Housing Committee Hearing

March 4th, 2021

S.B. 875, AN ACT CONCERNING THE RISK OF HOMELESSNESS FOR THOSE RELEASED FROM THE CUSTODY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION.

Senator Lopes, Representative McGee, Ranking Members Polletta and Cicarella, and distinguished members of the Housing Committee, thank you for hearing my testimony today on S.B. 875, An Act Concerning the Risk of Homelessness for Those Released from the Department of Correction.

Nearly 1,200 people that have been released from incarceration have used the homeless shelters throughout the state within the last 3 years. Concerns arise with regards to increased recidivism, continued crimes, return to substance use, lack of follow-through of mental health care and falling through the cracks with probation.

This revolving door between the two has significantly increased and now research shows a pattern with the adolescent age population. This pattern will be repeated when they reach adulthood unless we pass Act S.B. 875 by providing housing services upon discharge from incarceration.

For over 12 years I have worked with people returning from incarceration only to become homeless. Many of them need more than a rent, they need supports to help them obtain and maintain mental health and addiction services, supportive employment and supportive housing. And sometimes these things are not enough but without these services they crash and burn quickly and return to incarceration. For many of those that do receive the supports the greater chances they have at succeeding in becoming productive members of society.

I am a Director of a work apprenticeship program that provides employment to people with barriers that are keeping them from competitive employment. The number one barrier is legal history. Although there are companies that will accept felons, they want experience in that trade. That in itself becomes another barrier. Employment gives meaning and purpose to one's life. When someone is released without a home they have a slim chance of obtaining employment right away as they have no address or better yet, they use the shelter's address, which is generally known to employers and viewed as a "poor hire" because they come with "baggage". They are my hardest workers and are always wanting to learn and do more.

I oversee another program, a grant funded project through the City of New Haven, that houses homeless people in sober houses immediately and pays for 1 month rent. Resources contact me if a released inmate with no discharge placement seeks sober housing. What historically had been happening was released inmates didn't know how to access the program unless they fell on a bit of luck. Now with the new Re-Entry Center, they will make the referrals.

What I have found in these last 6 years is that many released inmates need more than just a Band-Aid (sober house), they need support services. I discovered that fact through our tracking process. Approximately 85% of those placed in sober housing don't make it for the 3 months tracked. Many are

discharged for non-compliance; i.e. substance use, disturbing other residents and not finding employment, as is required. Others walk off, the structure is too much.

I can't stress enough how much supportive services; i.e. housing, vocational, employment and case management, help people, especially those with barriers. The organization I work for has mental health supportive housing, including 3 forensic houses and 3 young adult programs. That is a just the tip of the iceberg. We need more. I hire these men through the Apprenticeship Program and have even taken them to the Capital to offer testimony on how much supportive housing and employment has helped them re-claim their lives.

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

Sincerely,

Elsa Ward, MS  
Director of Peer and Employment Svcs  
Continuum of Care