



*"Providing the most basic of human needs... food, shelter & hope"*

FISH • Friends In Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut, Inc.

332 South Main Street Torrington, CT 06790

Office 860.482.7300 • Fax 860.489.4807 • [info@fishnwct.org](mailto:info@fishnwct.org)

Testimony for the Appropriations Hearing/Department of Housing/February 19, 2021 -

From Deirdre H. DiCara, Executive Director, FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut

HB 6439 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023 (proposed budget for 2021-23)

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Gibson, Senator Hartley, Representative Kennedy, Senator Somers, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for reading and reviewing my testimony today in support of the Department of Housing, and all efforts being made to end homelessness in Connecticut. As we are well aware, Connecticut has made great strides in serving the homeless residents of our State, focused on moving our neighbors in need into housing as rapidly as possible. Our legislative leaders have been determined and dedicated to ending homelessness in CT using fiscal strategies and humanitarianism.

I write as the Executive Director of FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut. FISH NWCT serves our most vulnerable members of our greater Torrington/Litchfield County community, at our 35 bed Homeless Shelter and FISH Food Pantry that has over 1500 registered users. Every day we wipe the tears, listen to the stories, give a helping hand up, and sometimes literally save lives. And in this past year, we have been focused on keeping people safe and well during the Coronavirus pandemic. As a non-profit organization, we are dependent on the generosity of the community for donations, and we are very grateful to the State of CT's DOH for funding approximately 40-50% the expense of keeping the FISH Emergency Shelter's doors open to those homeless neighbors in our communities in economic crisis and desperate need. With a bare bones staff, that funding allows us to focus on our mission of "providing the most basic of human needs – food, shelter and hope" to those awaiting housing.

\*I'd to share our FISH NWCT Coronavirus story – of fear and anxiety - to currently resilience. I think you will join me in feeling some pride in our programs and services to the most vulnerable – the hungry and the homeless of NWCT. Our July and December editions of our "Report Card" COVID editions tell our story well. We pray for positive outcomes for those we serve, our volunteers, and staff who have been serving on the frontline, and those who so generously give.

\*Since early March, we have been challenged by the global Coronavirus pandemic. We have gone through the stages of fear, stress and anxiety - to what has evolved to become routine and resilient in our services to the hungry and the homeless of NWCT. We have learned to mask and socially distance in our communal/congregate home setting in the FISH Shelter. We championed "Team Stay Healthy" as we've created health and safety protocols, calling on local health care professionals. We decompressed our facility, moving half our residents who were most vulnerable (aged 60+ and health risks) – to a hotel funded by the CARES Act until June, providing them with meals, medical care and case management. Today we are focused on placing our residents into permanent supportive housing. And at the FISH

Food Pantry, where grocery store donations nearly ceased, and we experienced an increase in food demands due to unemployment, and we had to purchase food - we are now thankfully on an upswing of giving.

\*We are forever grateful to the many heroes and angels that have appeared during this pandemic! Numerous GREAT deeds, such as – folks who have been providing dinners in the shelter; mask makers; health providers who stepped up to help us re-arrange our dormitories and common areas, and advised on health protocols; miraculous financial donors and foundations that have created COVID – 19 grants; friends and Food Rescue US delivering groceries for the food pantry; the Litchfield Distillery making hand sanitizer and then donating people’s contributions to FISH, making up for the loss of our annual fund raiser that we count on; receiving hearts and rainbow pictures from children,...So many are shining in your/their goodness and generosity! And so we persevere, and with tenacity, we have received the first round of vaccinations for everyone in the Shelter. Thankfully, to date, and hopefully forever – the Coronavirus has not entered FISH NWCT.

\*We know that at the best of times - the programs and social services at FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of NWCT are critical to some for their survival and well - being. At the FISH Shelter for families, individuals and veterans, which last year had 7703 bed nights used, we have housed 103 homeless (70 adults, 16 children, and 17 veterans), and have successfully moved 53 former Shelter residents/households into permanent supportive housing. Our diversity is age – infants through seniors. This challenging success, positively changing and impacting people’s lives, is made possible through the network of a myriad of agencies and providers, starting with a call to 211 and support from the Department of Housing. (You may have seen FISH NWCT featured in the January 2018 edition of Connecticut Magazine - Community Profile – focusing on the stability we provide as our homeless residents await permanent housing in a safe and caring setting; as well as Litchfield Magazine’s July 2020 edition, as we manage congregate housing during the pandemic.)

Affordably housing Shelter residents is our top priority, made possible through collaborations with other agencies, local landlords, housing authorities, and the FISH Shelter’s Case Manager. While at FISH NWCT Shelter, we address through case management – medical and mental health issues, lack of insurance, government support programs, joblessness, transportation, family issues, law enforcement problems, and education and life skills – most of which we find collaborators to assist us. We are building the well-being and the confidence of the FISH NWCT Shelter residents so that they receive the positive boost needed to be stable, independent residents and productive citizens of Connecticut.

The DOH and the State’s financial support of FISH NWCT Emergency Shelter allows us to provide a safe, secure haven, in a family friendly communal setting, to folks in desperate need as they await permanent housing. There are “feel goods” every day at the FISH Emergency Homeless Shelter, even during this pandemic. Any day that we move a resident into their own housing is a celebration, such as John from Cornwall or Jim from Torrington after their heart surgeries; or hearing from 25 year old John who moved into housing three years ago and is excelling in life and states that you are his role model and shares his dreams via Facebook messenger; or residents enrolling in college and vocational certificate programs through our collaboration with the Northwest CT Community College; or former residents embracing our Executive and telling of their positive life progress and writing letters and sending cards; or the little girl that races across the shelter to hug Santa at our “Cocoa and Cookies” party – saying, “I knew you were real” – showing that we provide hope and dreams. A day that a resident lands a job is also a celebration. Bringing a newborn into the communal setting, which we will

do again in another month, where everyone is supportive and community churches aid us in gathering the needs of an infant is also a “feel good”. Creating a FISH Family environment means holiday gatherings and celebrating our kids’ birthdays and school graduations; our vets marching in the Memorial Day Parade to a wave of applause; parents maintaining their families; or house members helping each other as we move them into apartments. In our humanitarian work to give a hand up to the homeless, we believe that living in a homeless shelter should be made as pleasant as possible, yet still have expectations of our residents – especially now by masking and socially distancing. We are strict.

\*All of this - successfully changing the lives of the homeless into productively housed residents of the community - is made possible because of those who care enough about humanity, which includes the support of the Department of Housing and the State of CT, for its fellow citizens. Homelessness is an unacceptable condition for any Connecticut resident, and is an expensive public policy problem. Investing in frontline homeless services and shelters, permanent supportive housing, and support services, helps homeless families and individuals transition into stability and housing – all while saving public funding and resources.

\*The DOH Housing/Homeless Services line item for fiscal year 2022/23 – for frontline support of homeless/housing services, outreach, emergency homeless shelters, and the Rental Assistance Program – at \$85.5 million is essential to help those who are facing the crisis of homelessness and move them as rapidly as possible into permanent housing. Cuts to these services would risk reversing our progress in putting an end to chronic homelessness, and tragically increasing the number of homeless back onto our streets, placing themselves and others in the community at risk every day.

\*\*\*I would ask, knowing that DOH funding, in partnership with HUD, is focused on homeless outreach and affordable housing – that the homeless shelters of the State be recognized with an increase of support too. Currently only 40-50% of our funding to support the FISH Shelter, to cover our costs/expenses, comes through the DOH. As a non-profit, we are challenged annually to raise the funds to keep our doors open to serve the homeless (and in our case, also the hungry). And 2020 was a year of cancelled fundraisers.\*\*\*During the pandemic, we have justifiably been recognizing our staff with a modest bravery bonus/hazard pay – which was only covered/reimbursed for the first three to four months of the pandemic. Since, I encouraged our Board of Directors to continue the practice, because the challenge of working with our population during the Coronavirus pandemic has not lessened, as it is still deadly. We need to keep morale up for both our Shelter residents and staff.\*\*\*We non-profits are also facing the mandated \$15 minimum wage increase, which is much needed, yet the agency has not received any financial support from the DOH funding to assist us.\*\*\*We serve a vulnerable population, hopefully, positively impacting the lives of the homeless. We believe we have much unknown in our current and post-pandemic futures. With the landlord moratorium ending, with the unemployment issues that face CT families increasing, and for when federal SNAP and other benefits end or are cut – we non-profits expect a deluge of people/families needing assistance in a multitude of ways. We hope the Legislature recognizes the financial burden placed on our local agencies. We will need help. Many of us have bare-bones staff, carrying the load of multiple “jobs” – and having no dedicated fund development staff. And sadly, the State request/mandate to have municipalities assist their shelters annually with a stipend, no longer exists.\*\*\*The Shelters of CT and staff should truly be honored for our humanitarian work serving the at risk homeless population, especially during this pandemic. We on the frontline have not missed a beat in our services, even as we have faced the challenges of working with support services restricted to virtual support. We strive to meet our goal of finding housing programs for the homeless.

\*\*\*We encourage the State of CT to continue to outreach and give a hand up to our vulnerable, homeless residents at risk. Supporting the homeless and the providers assisting them is the right path to take to avoid tragedy and despair. Please continue to recognize the very human, social welfare challenges of families and individuals facing tribulations. We are so very thankful for the support provided by the DOH and government officials to support all the efforts being made to end homelessness in Connecticut, and for providing hope to those in need. We welcome you to visit FISH NWCT Shelter when this pandemic ends, and to view first - hand the DOH's funding and support in action. Please preserve our budget line. We could not manage to meet the needs and expenses of the FISH Shelter without this financial support from the DOH.

Sincerely,

Deirdre Houlihan DiCara, Executive Director

FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut

860-482-7300/ddicara@fishnwct.org

[www.fishnwct.org](http://www.fishnwct.org)

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