

257 Lawrence Street, Hartford CT 06106 | P (860) 721-7876 | www.cceh.org

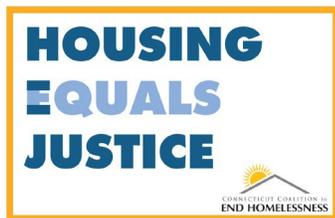
Governor's Proposed Budget FY2021-23
Appropriations Hearing
HB 6439 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
Department of Housing
Friday, February 19th, 2021

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Gibson, Senator Hartley, Representative Kennedy, Senator Somers, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for allowing to testify. My name is Sarah Fox and I am the Director of Policy at the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. I speak today representing a broad coalition of more than 100 organizations across Connecticut who are all committed to a common goal of achieving an end to homelessness in Connecticut. Our coalition includes non-profit providers of homeless services, as well as housing agencies, private sector businesses, and concerned citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on **H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefore**. I am here to discuss the important investments through the Department of Housing to support efforts to make Connecticut the first state to make homelessness rare, brief, and a one-time occurrence.

I would like to preface this testimony by first sharing that, of the many things our state has to be proud of, our work to address homelessness is at the top of the list. Communities across the country continue to look at our progress and seek answers from us on how to end homelessness. We have proven that homelessness is solvable and requires focus, coordination across state systems, good data to inform and measure our progress, strong state and local partnerships, and investments in innovative and proven strategies. Through the support of the Governor and the legislature, we have made tremendous real progress in ending homelessness for the people of Connecticut. Connecticut's 2020 Annual numbers of homeless reflect the lowest total since 2012 — a 57% drop in people using Connecticut's shelter system in just 7 years. Today, with the pandemic still ongoing, I am grateful for the strides we have taken, and for leadership from the CT Legislature and the Administration. I stand in awe of the herculean effort still underway by front-line homeless providers and staff to keep homeless people safe and swiftly re-housed each and every day.

With limited resources and fewer connections to their communities, people experiencing homelessness are often the most vulnerable and at-risk during a disaster or other emergency situation. Connecticut's homeless response system took urgent and critical actions to adapt to a dynamic event while continuing to serve one of the most vulnerable populations by securing hotel contracts across Connecticut and moving over 830 households from shelter to safer temporary living conditions and permanent housing. Testing data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) shows that, from



257 Lawrence Street, Hartford CT 06106 | P (860) 721-7876 | www.cceh.org

April 2020 to January 2021, only 74 positive tests out of more than 2,300 tests, or 3% of the homeless population, were identified statewide¹. The Connecticut homeless response system which is overseen by the CT Department of Housing and the Coordinated Access Networks (CANs), a system which is traditionally underfunded by state government, has served alongside the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the CT Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS) and DEMHS regions, the CT Department of Public Health and Local Health Departments, and the CT Department of Social Services to save lives, mitigate the public health crisis, and protect our most vulnerable neighbors from COVID-19.

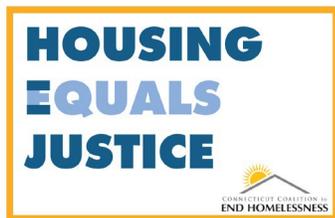
Beyond a massive shelter decompression effort and the swift work to provide safe and stable housing, CT's homeless response system and CANs continued to provide an impressive amount of assistance to the many households in our state facing a housing crisis. From October 2019 to October 2020, 2-1-1, the state's human service information and referral helpline, received 74,852 calls related to temporary shelter. 2-1-1 referred 16,452 households seeking housing services and supports to one of seven Coordinated Access Networks (CANs) which serve all individuals and families experiencing literal homelessness across the state².

Together, we have proven that your investments in the Connecticut homeless response network matter and result in positive outcomes, especially in times of crisis. Correspondingly, non-profit homeless services organizations, and the people who work for them, have played a critical role in protecting and assisting Connecticut's most vulnerable populations. During the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, homeless services has been an important part of the state's critical infrastructure and emergency response system. Regardless of their essential role homeless services organizations continue to be funded by state agencies at levels far below the actual cost of delivering homeless and housing assistance services. These services include shelter operations and case management, homeless outreach, shelter diversion and housing problem-solving, rapid re-housing case management and housing navigation, supportive housing program operations, and supportive housing case management.

Adequate funding is paramount to safeguarding the health and economic security of frontline staff. The net effect of asking providers to maintain or in some cases do more with flat funding has been lower wages, lower morale, higher turnover, and higher vacancy rates among front-line staff. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic saw these effects most acutely as homeless services organizations found themselves unable to fill staffing vacancies at a time when staffing needs were most urgent. We also know that front-line staff, and those fulfilling essential roles throughout the pandemic are disproportionately

¹ CT Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), 2021

² Emergency Shelter Dashboard - ctcandata.org



257 Lawrence Street, Hartford CT 06106 | P (860) 721-7876 | www.cceh.org

people of color. More must be done to protect these workers and their families. We must prioritize funding to homeless service organizations so that every employer is able to provide their staff with a safe working environment and a living wage. Adequate funding and ensuring livable wages would go a long way towards eliminating the racial and economic inequities that have become so glaring during this pandemic.

Equally, our efforts must be grounded in addressing racial inequities. Black Americans and Indigenous people experience homelessness at a higher rate in Connecticut due in most part to long standing historical and structural racism. African Americans make up 38% of homeless population but only 12.2% of the overall population. Hispanics make up 24% of homeless population and only 16.9% of the overall population³. Both groups have a higher incidence of COVID-19 cases and fatalities when compared to the general population. Housing instability puts people at risk for COVID-19, further deepening the existing racial disparities within public health.

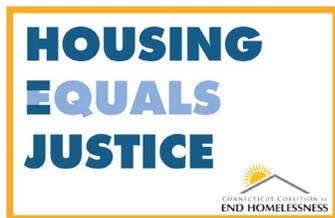
It is also important to note that more than 7,800 youth were estimated to be experiencing homelessness or serious housing instability in the 2020 statewide Youth Outreach and Count. Of those, 2,462 were estimated to be what's called, "literally homeless," meaning staying on the streets, in shelter, or in a place not meant for human habitation⁴. We also know that people of color and LGBTQ youth are over-represented in youth homelessness. We must strengthen Connecticut's crisis response to youth homelessness.

We must act with a shared responsibility to address this public health crisis, increase permanent housing options, and prevent increases in homelessness, CCEH respectfully requests that the committee support the following proposals from the Governor's budget for the Department of Housing (DOH):

- We support funding for the DOH Housing and Homelessness Line Item at \$85.5 million.
 - The Governor's budget proposes cutting \$3M from this line reflecting lapses for specific programs. We request that those funds be repurposed for the Rental Assistance Program and/or homeless services.
- We are also in support funding for the DOH Homeless Youth Line Item at \$2.65M in FY 22 and \$2.94M in FY 23

³ 2019 Census <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CT,US/PST045219>

⁴ 1 CT Coalition to End Homelessness, "2020 Youth Outreach and Count Report," available at: <https://cceh.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/12/Youth-Count-FINAL.pdf>



257 Lawrence Street, Hartford CT 06106 | P (860) 721-7876 | www.cceh.org

We also support the following additional investments through the DOH.

- We support the addition of \$2.3M in specific funding for Coordinated Access Networks (CANs) to a new line item called 'Homeless Supports' at the DOH.
- Lastly, we support an additional investment of \$2M in DOH's Housing/Homeless Services Line to provide rental assistance to 200 scattered-site supportive housing units.

Now is not the time to tighten our budgets and halt our progress to end homelessness. We should not balance our state budget on the backs of the most vulnerable men, women, and children or on those who are playing essential roles on the front-line of our states homelessness response. To that end, now is not the time to cut funding the organizations or as the Governor's budget proposes, return savings created by CHES initiative to the General Fund. I urge you to reinvest those savings directly to front-line providers so that they may continue to provide essential services through this public health crisis and beyond by increasing funding by \$461 million over the next five years to housing and homeless service providers along with other providers across the state's service-delivery system.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony, and for your hard work making important and life-saving decisions during this public health crisis – it is with your support that we can help make sure Connecticut's residents are healthy and stably housed.

Sincerely,

Sarah Fox
Director of Policy
CT Coalition to End Homelessness