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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

MARGARET MIDDLETON
CEO
COLUMBUS HOUSE

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Gibson, Senator Hartley, Representative Kennedy, Senator Somers, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for hearing my testimony today on House Bill 6439 (AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023).

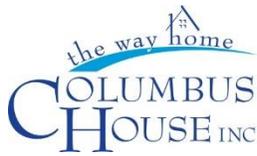
My name is **Margaret Middleton** and I am testifying today on behalf of **Columbus House, Inc. in my role as CEO**. Columbus House helps extremely low-income people achieve safe and stable housing in New Haven, Middlesex, New London and Hartford counties. My testimony today includes testimony from my colleagues Celeste Molina and Cheryl Gomes, case managers at Columbus House.

Increase Homeless Services Line to Value the Service of Essential Workers

When the pandemic hit, Columbus House's emergency housing teams in New Haven and Middletown, overwhelmingly black women and men, got up and went to work. They showed up at the emergency shelters despite the risk to themselves and their families. They showed up out of compassion for our clients and out of necessity to feed their families. They showed up to do essential work for our communities. Fortunately, because of a federal program, Columbus House has been able to provide essential workers with hazard pay during the pandemic. As of July 1st, 2021 hazard pay for Columbus House's essential workers will end.

By making a significant increase to homeless services line of the DOH budget, you would tell a group of primarily black public servants that their state values their essential work more than the minimum wage they were paid before the pandemic. You would tell these workers that since their work is important enough to warrant early vaccination, their work is important enough to earn a living wage. State employees and grocery store clerks can expect hazard pay for their essential work; why not people keeping emergency shelters open during a time of crisis?

Cheryl Gomes, Columbus House Shelter Case Manager, retired state employee and Ordained Chaplain who recently joined the Columbus House team describes her experience this way: "I presently am



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employed by the Columbus House as a Shelter Case Manager. I was surprised to witness the hard and dedicated work the staff provide to meet the needs of our clients. They show up every day regardless of weather, or the devastating pandemic situation. They work twice as hard for nearly half of the pay of a state employee. I am submitting this statement in support of hazard pay for Columbus House staff who are considered essential workers, predominantly African Americans. What is the difference in terms of hazardous pay for non-profit agency workers as opposed to state workers? How does the state pay one but not the other? There is no validity in this. Anyone who risks their own life to provide services during the pandemic should be allowed equal hazardous pay as such with their peers. We must do better, treat essentials workers equally. Bottom line.”

Hazard pay for essential workers is just one example of how the value of work provided by homeless services providers goes underfunded by the state. In order to fix this long-standing problem, we need a significant increase in the DOH budget for homeless services and we need structural change to the way the value of those services is calculated and paid. The Alliance for Community Nonprofits request to increase funding for nonprofits would add approximately \$3.8m to the DOH budget. That would be a start but it is simply not enough. The reforms outlined in proposed Senate Bill 340 would require the state to start its funding of homeless services with a calculation of the value of the service being provided. This reform would allow homeless service providers the opportunity to advocate for funding based on the work we actually do, rather than on what has been offered. Without this reform and a significantly larger budget increase than that called for by the Alliance, we face a staffing cliff in July when essential workers serving the homeless would be correct to conclude that there are easier ways to make minimum wage.

Connecticut Needs More RAPs

As a member of the statewide Reaching Home Campaign to prevent and end homelessness, Columbus House supports the Partnership for Strong Communities’ requests to this committee. I will speak to the importance of two of those requests.

First, **Connecticut must increase funding for more Rental Assistance Project (RAP) subsidies**. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Connecticut lacks almost 87,000 units of housing affordable to people with very low incomes. The extremely expensive and limited rental market in our state pushes the least resourced out of housing entirely. The only way to end homelessness is to significantly increase affordable housing. RAPs are the most efficient way to do that. We need a lot more than the \$20m the Partnership is asking for, but it would help.



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Celeste Molina, Permanent Supportive Housing Case Manager at Columbus House shares this story from her work that exemplifies the positive economic and social ripple effects of investment in housing subsidies. “I have been working with a young man who was homeless for many years. He came to us during the beginning stages of the pandemic and was in our shelter for some time before being transferred to the hotel. He worked with the Case Manager at the shelter and during his stay he was linked to multiple services that would positively impact his life. In a matter of months, he was approved for a Section 8 voucher. The client was also matched to me as his Case manager. This young man has 2 young boys who he could rarely spend time with because of his homeless status. We worked diligently and ultimately found a one-bedroom apartment in New Heaven that the client would say he “fell in love” with. The client is now able to spend more time with his children. Ready for employment he applied and was hired at Amazon. While the pandemic continued, he was even able to contribute by bringing the children to his home for remote learning during his days off from work so that the children’s mother could work.”

Support the Coordinated Access Networks

Columbus House supports the addition of \$2.3M in specific funding for Coordinated Access Networks (CANs) to a new line item called ‘Homeless Supports’ at the DOH.

Since 2012, the number of people utilizing Connecticut’s shelter system has decreased by 57%. This is in part thanks to the work of the Coordinated Access Networks, which act as the triage nurses of the housing crisis system. We charge them with matching up the needs of an individual in crisis and the resources available at that moment to make homelessness rare, brief and one time. At Columbus House we constantly feel the challenges caused by the underfunding of both the Greater New Haven and Middletown-Meriden-Wallingford CANs. There were days this fall when we knew there were people in need of shelter and there were shelter beds available, and simply not enough capacity at the CAN to get the people and the resources matched up in a timely way. The people working in our CANs are smart, committed, and hard-working; give them the resources to achieve their mission and you will maximize the state’s other investments in emergency housing.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony, and for your commitment to end homelessness in our state.

Sincerely,

**Margaret Middleton, CEO
Columbus House, Inc.**

