

## **Department of Housing Budget**

### **Testimony of Raphael L. Podolsky**

Appropriations Committee public hearing – February 19, 2021

As everyone knows, the pandemic has produced a housing crisis of enormous proportion, seriously affecting both landlords and tenants. Both the state and the federal government have responded with programming designed to stabilize the rental market by preventing most evictions and providing rental assistance to landlords for the benefit of tenants who have fallen behind in the rent. The largest portion of this money is federal, coming primarily through the Coronavirus Relief Fund. The most recent federal allocation to Connecticut is \$237 million for rental assistance. The Department of Housing (DOH) is replacing its former program (the Temporary Rental Housing Assistance Program, which is now closed) with a new program – the **Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)** – which I am cautiously optimistic will have the structure and capacity to act quickly and effectively.

I come to the Committee because the federal funds are likely to leave gaps in the provision of assistance, and it is therefore important that the state be maintaining and funding programs that can effectively fill those gaps. These include the following:

- **Undocumented immigrants**: We strongly believe that federal law does not require the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from ERAP (or from the previous TRHAP program). The federal ERAP statute contains no such provision. DOH continues to insist, however, that unless the Department of the Treasury issues specific guidance, it will exclude undocumented immigrants. This leaves such households at great risk and, in addition, denies rental assistance on their behalf to their landlords. We disagree with DOH's position on this issue. However, as long as it remains, it is critical that the state maintain and adequately fund a parallel program, which it does not have, to protect these households.
- **Eviction prevention**: The initial TRHAP program and the DOH Homelessness Prevention Program left a gap for tenants facing imminent eviction but lacking many of the traits of chronic homelessness (e.g., criminal record or mental health issues). They are simply poor, some of them chronically poor. Many of them are newly poor, having been hard hit by job loss, illness, or other conditions that the pandemic has highlighted. I believe that the new ERAP program is looking for ways to include them in a timely manner, i.e., during the eviction process. If it does not, then an expanded state-funded Eviction Prevention Program would be essential. Eviction prevention also includes the costs associated with a tenant moving "voluntarily" to avoid physical eviction – moving costs, first month's rent, and security deposit. It is not clear at the moment how ERAP will apply to such tenants. If it does not provide this assistance, it is important that existing state programs be adequately funded to meet these needs.