

Insert Your Logo

March 26, 2021 Public Hearing Testimony before the Connecticut General Assembly's Appropriations Committee In support of Senate Bill 340: An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Committee on Appropriations: Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of submit testimony Senate Bill 340, An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services.

My name is Jane Banks and I serve as the Executive Director of South Park Inn, an emergency shelter, medical respite and transitional housing site serving individuals experiencing homelessness, including veterans. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support if Senate Bill 340, An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services.

I am here today to respectfully request that state enact a law requiring state agencies to ensure that funding levels for homelessness and housing assistance services reflect the true cost of these professional services, to include, paying competitive wages and benefits to front-line workers who staff shelters, Coordinated Access Network appointments, homeless outreach, and housing navigation and case management services.

Regardless of their essential role homeless and housing services organizations continue to be funded by state agencies at levels far below the actual cost of delivering homeless and housing assistance services. For over 10 years, state agencies like the Department of Housing and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services have required homeless and housing services organizations to maintain the same level of services at level/flat funding levels, essentially reducing the "actual per client or per unit" funding levels. There have been no adjustments to funding levels to reasonably cover inflationary costs and therefore limiting a provider's ability to maintain its ability to administer their programs, these rising costs include such items as employee salaries, training/supervision costs, rent, heat, fuel, and health insurance costs. Please:

1. Require the state to establish an independent, evidence-based process to set rates which reflect the optimal and sustainable costs of operating an emergency crisis response system to serve everyone who experiences a housing crisis.
2. Require the state to establish an independent, evidence-based process to set new unit rates which reflect the optimal and sustainable costs of the services provided to end homelessness.
3. This review must consider living wages, overtime and hazard pay, fringe and benefits, and other than personnel costs such as supervision, supplies, staff training and professional development, technology administrative support, and more.

Insert Your Logo

4. These standards and revised payment structure should then be revised each biennium based on a review of changes to cost-of-living and other cost changes.
5. Require the Commissioners of DOH, DMHAS, and other housing related funding department to use the revised payment structure and standards as the basis of any new services contracts.

Non-profit homeless and housing services organizations, and the people who work for them, play a critical role in protecting and assisting Connecticut's most vulnerable populations. During the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, homeless and housing services have played an important part of the state's critical infrastructure and emergency response system.

For years, non-profit homeless and housing services organizations have been talking about the fact that anyone can become homeless at any time and for any reason. Because of the pandemic, so many more of our community neighbors are at a place where housing instability is knocking at their doors. Here we are, as a nation, a state, and a community, with our underbelly fully exposed to the inequities and injustices of a fragile housing system, gentrification and underfunded contracts. As you think about our funding, the low wages our employees are paid, the question I would ask myself, as a leader is- Do I feel good, knowing the people with the heaviest lift, working on our front lines, protecting our most vulnerable neighbors, are making some of the lowest wages in our state? Would I be able to support my family on \$12.50 an hour? Not everyone had/has the luxury of working from home; the staff at South Park Inn came to work EVERY DAY during the pandemic. Some staff not only came to work at South Park Inn but also went to their second or third jobs. How does that make sense in our country, in our state, in 2021? Non-profit homeless and housing services organizations should be funded to pay our employees a living wage. A living wage that would allow them to work one job.

As you read the testimony from our Deputy Director, Yoshi Bird, South Park Inn's staff were fearless in their work during the pandemic. All staff should be paid fairly and decently. They are entitled to a living wage.

We must prioritize adequate funding to homeless service organizations so that every employer is able to provide their staff with a safe working environment and a living wage. Creating a funding schematic that ensures livable wages and benefits would go a long way towards eliminating the racial and economic inequities that have become so glaring during this pandemic.

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,

Insert Your Logo