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**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:

My name is Yoshi Bird, and I serve as Deputy 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 of submit testimony Senate Bill 340, An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Park Inn played a pivotal role in the unprecedented transition of people experiencing homelessness across greater Hartford into multiple area hotel sites in order to maximize safety through social distancing and specially-adapted service delivery protocols. At a time when our agency's direct care, case management, supervisory staff, and executive management were all hit hard with cascading periods of 14-day COVID-related leave, we were developing all-new infectious disease prevention protocols and facilitating a massive relocation effort for guests of both our and partner provider shelter sites into the hotels, a collaboration that resulted in South Park Inn providing services and essential needs items to clients of our shelter, two closing Warming Center sites, and a handful of unsheltered persons. Every day, direct care staff were responsible for unloading hundreds of pounds of food and distributing among the hotel rooms; liaising with hotel staff to ensure secure key management and to oversee every day's entries and exits; providing education on social distancing and mask-wearing to guests congregating on smoke breaks; distributing towels, wash cloths, toilet paper, and other paper goods as needed; providing laundry money and detergent to clients with no income; and attending to the herculean task of waste management, including the management of personal belongings left behind when clients moved on.

At the same time, South Park Inn also needed to staff its primary sites as well, where clients ineligible for DOH-funded hotel stays were left in place. This created a significant staffing crisis, as our need to maintain adequate site coverage became difficult to balance with the need to provide sufficient support to the hotel sites with their unique and evolving challenges. Direct care staff became overburdened with overtime work leading to exhaustion and stress, which layered atop their anxiety about all that was unknown about COVID and about the pandemic in general. The agency struggled to pay direct care staff both hazard pay and overtime in recognition of the extraordinary work they were called to do. However, due to the strength of our staff's commitment and experience, **only one guest of South Park Inn's emergency shelter tested positive for COVID-19 between April 2020 and March 2021.** When outbreaks began in other South Park Inn programs, they were quickly contained due to careful forethought and well-executed protocols.

As a result of the agency's strength in responding to the pandemic, we developed and launched the region's only dedicated emergency shelter beds for people experiencing

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homelessness who were either COVID-positive or recently exposed. When a partner provider discovered an outbreak among 14 of its guests, South Park Inn was able to successfully isolate all 14 guests for the CDC-recommended timeframe.

**Our staff are remarkable.** They have demonstrated time again a commitment to this work – as well as composure under conditions of extreme stress – that is nothing short of awe-inspiring. They deserve better. They deserve a rate of compensation that recognizes the value of their work as First Responders, both within the pandemic and within the broader crisis of homelessness. When healthcare workers had ample access to PPE and hand sanitizer, our staff did not. When the pandemic started and there was no access to medical transportation, our staff risked their health to transport clients to testing, waiting for up to five hours in closed vehicles with symptomatic clients. While hospital and public health workers can enforce mask-wearing mandates and basic hygiene among their staff and patients, shelter and housing providers cannot do the same without violating federal housing and disability law. Our staff needed to troubleshoot novel questions with little guidance, like how to keep people in isolation who were experiencing end-stage alcoholism or acute drug dependency – when detox facilities were unwilling or unable to accommodate them and abstinence without medical oversight presented potentially-fatal risk. Our staff are exposed to unacceptable levels of risk every day; the law provides them little protection from the risk behaviors of others in their workplace; and they are paid a fraction of what many First Responders with more protection are paid. This state of affairs is criminal. People doing the triage work of emergency room nurses in an unregulated environment rife with mental illness and addiction need to be recognized formally for their contributions to public health, and that starts with equal pay and a fair rate.

I am writing 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, including 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.

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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.
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.

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,

**NAME**  
**TITLE**  
**ORGANIZATION**