

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 Terri-Jo Ciocca, and I am privileged to work for New Reach, Inc. The mission of New Reach is to inspire independence for all those affected by homelessness and poverty through a continuum of housing and support using the most innovative, progressive, equitable, and inclusive methods. Our goal is to end homelessness, and our staff work tirelessly every day of the year to accomplish this through prevention services (our eviction prevention services have a 98% success rate over the past 11 years), crisis services (our successes in housing those in crisis far exceed the state averages), and an array of housing options. We serve those whose income falls in the extremely low-income tier in the Greater New Haven Region and in Fairfield County, and who typically have faced traumatic histories or other complicated life issues.

I am here today to respectfully request that the 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.
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.

As the grant writer for New Reach, I have seen how unpredictable and declining public funding has impacted our organization while our client counts and costs to sustain high quality operations and facilities continue to escalate each year. Furthermore, the introduction of the state's Coordinated Access Network (CAN) has certainly and positively ensured that the most vulnerable are prioritized and matched to the appropriate shelter/housing in the region. However, this highly collaborative and streamlined system has also resulted in an increased intensity and complexity of cases. Such a consequence requires a high level of knowledge and skill from our frontline staff, and also increases their likelihood of being affected by vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. This has also required a higher level of staff training – adding more costs. With the current pandemic crisis and increase in households facing traumatic life experiences (unemployment, lost wages, evictions/homelessness), our infrastructure is challenged again --- staff are continuously focusing on the safety of all clients and staff with regard to the COVID-19, communicating the need for testing and educating clients on the accessibility and pros and cons of vaccinations. Although New Reach operates on a Housing First philosophy of care, our staff do far more than housing --- and there are many complexities involved in the housing piece alone for which they are giving the highest level of support while earning minimal wages themselves.

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.

The adverse economic effects of COVID-19 on New Reach have been multifold including but not limited to: an increased attention and response to the safety and health of our clients and staff; an increased demand for direct services; frequent and costly deep cleanings of all facilities; technological enhancements as staff work remotely from home; a significant loss in fundraising revenue; as well as a multitude of other long-term challenges. While ensuring their own self and family's safety, our staff have been focused on the health of their clients. Our program services have not paused during this pandemic and have intensified in operational adjustments while sustaining a highly compassionate level of care.

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.

As an organization intent on serving those who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless and who have extremely low-income levels, chronic underfunding places further undue burden on those who are providing the inspiration and motivation so that clients reach their personal goals and feel supported as they journey through immense challenges. Every year, New Reach experiences gaps in funding for programming. Our organization is solid, creative, and has a strong leadership and team that works collaboratively to create a diverse portfolio of revenue – however, finding funding to fill operational gaps is a continual challenge as most funders are seeking to invest in new and innovative programming with lots of restrictions. It is with urgency and sincerity that I speak today and plead that **the Connecticut General Assembly** fully considers the impact of chronic underfunding on our ability to pay our essential frontline staff the livable wages they deserve.

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,
T-J Ciocca
Terri-Jo Ciocca
Grant Writer
New Reach, Inc.