

SB 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 Senate Bill 340, An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services.

I am respectfully requesting that the State of Connecticut 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. That includes, paying significant, competitive wages and benefits to front-line workers who staff shelters, Coordinated Access Network appointments, homeless outreach, and case management services. It is known that the Human and Social Services field is underpaid for the work that is being provided. Many workers, such as myself, do our jobs not necessarily for the money but because we care about the community's needs. However, now with COVID many areas of concern arose- job loss, reduction in hours, housing costs, livable wages, and largely public health concerns. Essential workers in the midst of the pandemic have been praised for our dedication to serving our respective communities, and yet cannot be compensated for our dedication. Everyday we are risking our lives, putting our own health and safety at risk, in order to be of support to vulnerable populations. Funding for medical benefits, proper professional development training in COVID-related matters and crisis response services should be allotted to essential workers of these local human and social services organizations.

Emergency shelter workers and other essential workers are generally people of color, that work to cover living expenses such as childcare, their own housing, and other living expenses. The minimum wages, currently supported by State funding tells Essential workers of color that our time and support is appreciated but undervalued. We are the ones showing up to work in midst of inclement weather, having to seek and pay for childcare, working varying shifts to be present for our communities. For some essential workers, this is the only source of income and should we get sick, we are out of work, missing pay and have no health benefits. I became sick in the midst of the pandemic which caused a loss of wages due to being unable to work my shifts. Fortunately for me, I have another source of income, health benefits and was able to use some of my accrued sick time to compensate for my lost wages. Not every essential worker is as fortunate. This is why it is imperative that essential workers receive sick time/PTO, health insurance, childcare benefits, and hazard pay especially with COVID being a global risk. Without Essential workers there would be no services provided. We are the front-line. We are needed. We deserve to be cared for just as much as the communities we serve.

For over 10 years, state agencies 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. But times have changed, the needs have changed. We were not in a global pandemic 10 years ago. There have been no adjustments to funding levels to reasonably cover expenses which limits a provider's ability to thoroughly maintain and administer their programs. Some of which are new programs

created with COVID.

Shelters such as the Warming Center in Middletown, was impacted by a shortage of PPE, supplies, and a shortage in space and rooms for the homeless and vulnerable population. This resulted in having to turn potential clients away with a blanket and bottled water when they showed up to the center. Or telling 211 that we were filled to capacity. Funding would have provided greater opportunity for space to service clients in need.

On another note, I've personally had community members coordinate to generously donate items such as socks, hand warmers, scarves, and hot meals to the shelter. On my days off, I was one of the staff members that would bring the items to the shelter for the staff to provide to the clients on their shifts. We worked effortlessly as a team to keep our clients, content, warm and safe during a tough time. While donations are great, there are many organizations that could be funded along with Columbus House to provide such items. And a shortage in PPE results in potential outbreaks throughout the center that affects the organization of the program. Having to shift center dynamics- staff and clients due to an outbreak and then contain the outbreak can be challenging. The goal is to minimize potential outbreaks all while keeping everyone safe. With adequate funding this reduces the risks of outbreaks.

COVID put a microscope over the disparities and inequities that were being swept under the rug for so long. We are now seeing the effects of what those inequities can do across our state to our workers and our vulnerable populations.

Ideally when factoring appropriate funding the following should be considered:

1. Require a review of the programs and services offered in order to reflect substantial wages, overtime, hazard pay, medical benefits, funding for professional development, crisis/risk management services, and case management.
2. Require the state to establish an independent, evidence-based process to set rates which reflect the costs of operating an emergency crisis response system to serve everyone who experiences a housing crisis as well as the costs of the services provided to end homelessness.
3. A more fluid process by which to assist clients in obtaining housing services.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony, and for your hard work and efforts towards making important and life-saving decisions during this global pandemic. It is my hope that you support this bill, and help to ensure the health and stability of Connecticut' residents.

Sincerely,
Shanay Fulton- Middletown, CT
Residential Supervisor-Columbus House
Planning & Zoning Commissioner