



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

My name is **Margaret Middleton**, I am the **CEO of Columbus House, Inc.**, which helps very low-income people achieve permanent affordable housing in New Haven, Middlesex, Hartford and New London counties.

Investing state funding in emergency housing providers invests in the health and well-being of the communities you represent. Investing in emergency housing services keeps your community healthy; we have been out in the community providing front-line services during the pandemic keeping our clients and thus our communities safe from COVID. Investing in emergency housing services reduces homelessness in your community; Columbus House mobilized to help over 450 people move into permanent housing in the last year. Investing in emergency housing services would help pay a living wage to the primarily African American essential workers whose compassion and professionalism make emergency housing possible. Investing in these workers is investing in the well-being of your community.

I respectfully request that state enact SB 340 which would require 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, housing navigation and case management services.

Regardless of the essential role homeless and housing services organizations like Columbus House play, we continue to be entirely unfunded by the state, or funded by state agencies at levels far below what those services should cost. The intention of SB 340 is simple: we ask that our funding be based on the work we perform for the state and on the needs of our clients.

SB 340 should:

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 including helping clients identify, secure, move into and maintain safe, affordable, and secure housing.
3. This review must set these rates based on paying 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 departments to use the revised payment structure and standards as the basis of any new services contracts.

Emergency Housing is an unfunded part of the State's Emergency Crisis Response

Like the Fire Department, the Police, and the EMS, our state and municipal government correctly expects the emergency crisis housing system to be ready and able to assist people in crisis on a moment's notice. COVID has demonstrated that emergency housing is an essential part of our state's crisis response system and public health system. However, the state does not fund the housing crisis response. Instead of a comprehensive statewide response, the state of Connecticut leaves it up to beleaguered city and town budgets to address the manifestation of the state's affordable housing crisis. Columbus House provided emergency crisis housing to 1,160 people experiencing homelessness in fiscal year 2019. Of those, just over one third (428) were in a program funded by the state of Connecticut. The nonprofit sector has made a compelling case this session that the sector broadly underfunded by the state. But the emergency crisis response system is not just underfunded: it is unfunded. We need you to fix that.



The Emergency Crisis Response System Isn't Funded by the State

Program	Number of People Served FY 2019	% of FY 2019 expenses provided by the State of Connecticut
New Haven Emergency Shelter	345	71%
New Haven Overflow Shelter (Winter only)	365	0%
Middletown Family Shelter	83 (in 23 Families)	93%
Middletown Warming Center (Winter only)	138	0%
Wallingford Emergency Shelter	34	0%
Wallingford Family Shelter	29 (in 10 Families)	0%
Hamden Warming Center	166	0%



Columbus House's clients require well-funded programs to thrive.

Columbus House could do so much more to support people in crisis but for the lack of funding. We could provide the people in winter-only programs with help finding permanent housing, securing employment, regular medical care and disability benefits. We could provide them with a hot meal and a place to stay during cold winter days and not just nights. We could provide them with access to laundry. We could help those in the shelters move on more quickly with the help of a more experienced and better trained staff with longevity.

Inadequate funding stifles innovation.

Columbus House would create more innovative programming to end homelessness if we were not busy raising money to shore up the lack of a statewide housing crisis response. We are proud to be nationally recognized pioneers of the medical respite program and shared housing model of housing. We would like to explore interdisciplinary partnerships to better serve our clients mental health and legal needs. Unfortunately, we must put the relatively few dollars we control into meeting basic expenses, leaving little for pursuing paradigm-shifting ideas like these.

Investing in Emergency Housing Services Invests in Black and Brown Essential Workers

Emergency crisis housing services only exist in our state because of the compassion, professionalism and dedication of Black women and men who do the work despite poverty-level wages. The impact of insufficient funding is that our frontline staff, 90% of whom identify as Black, are one car accident, one medical bill, one divorce away from being homeless themselves. Investing state funding in emergency housing programs would immediately support the people of color who are the bedrock of this system. By underfunding emergency shelter, the state of Connecticut puts the burden of responding to housing crises on the backs of low-wage black women and men, passing SB 340 would start to address this ongoing racial inequity.

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 ensure Connecticut's residents are healthy and stably housed.

Sincerely,

Margaret Middleton
CEO
Columbus House