

**Testimony in Support of SB 340,
An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services**

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Submitted by:
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Greetings, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and the esteemed members of the Committee on Appropriations: my name is Marlaina Rodriguez and I am a graduate student at the University of Connecticut pursuing master's degrees in social work and public administration. I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 340, An Act Concerning Funding for Housing Services. I work for two different nonprofit homelessness service providers, one in New Haven and the other in New Britain.

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.

The current funding schemes for housing and homelessness services are flawed and dangerously inadequate. Homeless shelters are a part of the state's emergency crisis response system. Emergency Housing staff persevere under some of the most stressful and challenging circumstances. They are essential workers on the frontlines serving the most vulnerable members of our communities. Shelters save lives and it is time that we pay shelter staff like the heroes that they are.

I have been working in the realm of housing instability and homelessness for nearly 13 years and I can tell you that in my experience, in order to provide the best professional social work services that produce the best case management and client outcomes, agencies need a stable workforce. With the stagnant state funding that has not kept up with inflation and rising employment costs, case management positions often become revolving doors. With workers coming in and out of agencies, we are not setting up clients for the best possible results. Those experiencing homelessness need and deserve steady, stable support. And those providing the steady, stable support need and deserve a professional wage so they don't have to find work elsewhere to sustain themselves.

To provide the best services to end homelessness our state needs a law requiring state agencies to ensure that funding levels for homelessness and housing assistance programs reflect the true cost of these professional services. Connecticut needs an

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.

Agencies that provide these vital services should not have to rely on philanthropy in order to fill the income gaps caused by flawed state funding. These agencies are too busy providing basic human needs to vulnerable members of our communities. Filling these funding gaps in the time of COVID is a horrendous burden on nonprofit service providers. I'm sure I'm not the only one that is fatigued from attending virtual auctions and Zoom galas. We can't charity our way out of this. It is time for the state to 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 system that ensures livable wages and benefits would go a long way towards eliminating the racial and economic inequities that have been brought to light during this pandemic.

To fix the funding issues facing homelessness service providers, please consider the following:

- 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) 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.
- 3) 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 modifications.
- 4) 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.

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.

Respectfully,
Marlaina Rodriguez
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