

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

I am Mary Rogers. I currently volunteer at the Friendship Service Center, Inc (FSC) in New Britain and previously served on their Board of Directors. The FSC believes that every human has value and as such wants to help create a world without homelessness. With community collaboration, the FSC's work is love made visible through supportive services and partnership with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The FSC's Coordinated Access Network (CAN) serves New Britain, Berlin, Bristol, Plainville, and Southington.

I am writing 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, CAN appointments, homeless outreach, and housing navigation and case management services.

My experience in working on the FSC's budget reveals that 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. The funds provided don't cover rising costs including such items as employee salaries and benefits, training/supervision costs, rent, heat, fuel, and health insurance costs. More importantly, some organizations, like the FSC, serve clients with extra needs due to mental health and/or addiction issues. Those issues add to the cost of serving these clients in a beneficial way. I've heard FSC Staff say that they can't get more government funding because a program is "fully funded" when in reality the funding doesn't cover expenses.

I urge you to consider:

1. Requiring 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. Requiring 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. Requiring 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.

The FSC opened a new Permanent Supportive Housing program in 2018. While construction costs were covered, operating costs started with a deficit and continue to be enough to support the program. This is sad because if this program were to end due to lack of funding, that would be at least 11 people who would once again be facing homelessness. “With the opening of Howie House, the city will be at “functional zero” for the number of chronically homeless individuals who need housing. It’s a far cry from four years ago when close to 100 people were living on the streets including dozens of chronically homeless individuals who had been struggling to find shelter and services, in some cases for years.” From <http://www.newbritainherald.com/NBH-New+Britain+News/333501/howey-house-new-hope-for-new-britains-homeless>

The COVID-19 pandemic increased costs and created an environment where more people were at risk of homelessness. It also caused a loss of volunteers. But the FSC has stayed on track because their services are essential. The FSC was able to keep all their programs open, though there were adjustments, like to-go meals and partnering with area restaurants. They even started a triage center that has plans to expand; here are some articles about it:

http://www.newbritainherald.com/NBH-New+Britain+News/387827/friendship-centers-triage-center-having-success-dealing-with-community-members-in-need?fbclid=IwAR1Yy01dQtzv0JCjLUcOf9FaAnlx4eHVjlhEBMyFzpY_SLI6GLn7WTN8Ye4

http://www.newbritainherald.com/article/view/article_id/387828/headline/friendship-center-wants-to-expand-current-triage-center/section/?fbclid=IwAR1o8xDNZEjUFyFBuzxtF_Q2Rz-FqJA5ikT1-LeTvlPg7UCr9_5dxrHdEuk

Another area of the budget that is underfunded is salaries. The FSC Staff work under enormous stress, and yet manage to stay compassionate. It is hard to show appreciation with adequate wages and benefits when funding doesn’t provide it.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony. Thank you for serving in Connecticut’s legislation and working to keep residents healthy and stably housed.

Sincerely,

Mary Rogers

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This week’s quote is, “I raise up my voice—not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. ... We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.” - Malala Yousafzai