

MASH



5231

MYSTIC AREA SHELTER & HOSPITALITY, INC.
Making a difference in the lives of homeless families

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To: The Human Services Committee
February 5, 2009

Proposed H. B. No. 5231: AN ACT CONCERNING A PILOT PROJECT TO PROVIDE HOUSING TO FAMILIES SEEKING EMERGENCY SHELTER.

Senator Doyle, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

My name is Lynda McCrea, and I am the Executive Director of Mystic Area Shelter and Hospitality, Inc. I am here today to testify in support of H.B.No.5231: An Act Concerning a Pilot Project to Provide Housing to Families Seeking Emergency Shelter.

Jose and Jeannette came into our program in after losing their housing due to unsafe living conditions. Parents of an infant child and a young daughter, they were distraught that they were in this situation and only hours away from living in their car. Although Jose was working two jobs, their income was not enough for independent housing. Jeannette knew she needed to find employment but like others in her situation; she could not afford day care and did not have transportation. The family car was being used by Jose as he went from job to job and purchasing another one was out of their means. The light at the end of their tunnel was the services that were available to them. The Beyond Shelter program was instrumental in working with them on a reasonable housing budget and assisting them in securing affordable housing. Flexible funds provided through the MASH assisted them in meeting their rental obligations until they were able to stabilize. Once housed, through funds provided by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH) they were able to find childcare allowing Jeannette to gain employment and her Care for Kids subsidy. Today the family is thriving. Without these resources this family would still be in our shelter system.

Jose and Jeannette's story is not unique but very representative to the families we see everyday, not to mention those who call frightened that the shelters are full and afraid that the only alternative open to them to sleeping in their car and surrendering their children to DCF.

The past two years we have seen an unprecedented rise of families seeking emergency shelter services. Most of these families are not chronically homeless, but working families who through temporary loss of employment, medical problems, or dissolution of a relationship, found themselves losing their safe and secure housing. Once in the shelter we were finding it increasingly difficult to move back them back into the housing market due to lack of affordable housing, add a eviction on their record, and the financial strains of having to produce a large sum of money to enter into a rental agreement and you can increase a stay in the shelter system up to 6 months.

As we started to see this trend reaching epidemic proportions we knew that we needed to do more. For MASH, adding more shelter beds was not the answer. As an agency that prides itself in finding innovative solutions, we researched best practices in ending family homelessness and sought council from the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness on instituting a prevention and rapid re-housing model. By using the prevention and rapid re-housing tools, we have been able to decrease our average length of stay 52% thus opening up our emergency beds to those with more significant barriers to housing.

For our program, the keys to success are the following:

- **Flexibility of the funds.** The financial support can be tailored to meet the needs of the family. This may include payment of security deposits and first month's rent to six-month rent subsidies and assistance with rental and utility rearranges.
- **Comprehensive case management services.** Six months of mandatory case management services provided to the families allows us to address underlying issues which may have contributed to their housing decline.
- **Collaboration with outside agencies.** From our front line services providers such as the local town social-services departments who identify families in need, to the Beyond Shelter program who work with us to find affordable housing, it has allowed us to leverage services without duplication.
- **Financial viability.** The average cost of sheltering one family in our emergency program is \$1,500 a month. If a family stays in the shelter system for 6 months the cost runs over \$9,000. To stabilize a family in their own housing we can reduce those numbers to \$3,500 per family and provide more services to those in need.

If I may, I would like to leave you with a message Jeannette would like to share with you:

"MASH has really been a great experience for my family and I. MASH has given us a great new start at new opportunities. I am very grateful for such a program. I thank God everyday for the security this program is providing and the wonderful support from MASH and the Beyond Shelter staff. Being a part of this program is a blessing. I fear to think where we would be right now if this program were not available. This program has helped us with feeling hopeful for our future. We now have a better chance at being more productive people with the hopes of paying it forward one day."

In Conclusion, for every one we can help, there are many more fighting this struggle everyday. Without proper funding, these families will enter the vicious cycle of homelessness, which many find it hard to recover from. By passing H. B. No. 5231 you to will be enabling us to fulfill our mission of ending family homelessness, one family at a time and restore hope and dignity to our families in need.

I thank you for your time, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.