

Diane Randall Testimony  
 Appropriations Committee  
 December 9, 2009



Senator Harp, Rep. Gerogosian, members of the Appropriations Committee,

I am Diane Randall, Executive Director of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide housing policy organization that engages civic and political support to solve homelessness, create affordable housing and develop strong, vibrant communities.

**I am here to strongly request that you reject Gov. Rell's proposal to eliminate funding for HOMEConnecticut and cut housing/homelessness services in her deficit mitigation plan.**

Taking away this funding will obliterate the cornerstone of a household's ability to function independently and successfully in an affordable, safe, secure home. Moreover, it will unravel the progress we have made – YOU have made – in reversing the shortage of affordable homes that threatens Connecticut's economy, families and future.

### ***Not a Time to Cut Housing Assistance***

**Housing/Homelessness Cuts** On Nov 24, the Governor made a **\$2,070,575 rescission to the Housing/Homelessness Services** line item in the Department of Social Services. This funding pays for Rental Assistance for poor families with children, elderly and people with disabilities on very limited or no income; it also contributes to the costs of operating emergency shelters, eviction prevention programs, AIDS housing and other services that prevent homelessness and assist very low income families and individuals attain stable, affordable housing. There is also a **\$255,000 rescission to the Housing Support and Services** line item in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

The Governor's deficit mitigation plan proposes a **25% cut** to non-entitlement grant accounts in DSS, which includes **Housing/Homelessness**; as just one example of the impact of this cut—reducing the RAP program by 25% would result in nearly 500 households without a subsidy to pay the rent.

**HOMEConnecticut**—The mitigation plan further **cuts the HOMEConnecticut program of \$2.3 million**. Over 50 towns are in the planning stages for initiating Incentive Housing Zones that would foster NEW housing development for modest rate and affordable housing and generate NEW economic activity for our cities and towns. Thirty-five towns have received planning grants and fifteen towns have applications pending. This

program, while still young, has generated enormous response from planners, community development officers and elected officials looking for positive solutions to responsibly using land, addressing housing affordability and revitalizing their local economies.

**Community Investment Act**—The deficit mitigation plan sweeps the \$4.8 million in the Community Investment Act funds that have not only fostered open space, historic and farmland preservation, but also funded Housing Connections, which has provided vital technical assistance to dozens of towns and community groups creating housing, and such projects as 410 Asylum Street, at the foot of Bushnell Park, the latest sterling example of how mixed-income housing can be beautiful, well-designed, green, and affordable, all in smart-growth locations.

### ***A Sign of Hope***

**Supportive Housing—Next Steps, Round III** Leadership at the Office of Policy and Management have told us that the proposed reduction of \$1.8 million in the Governor's plan to "delay supportive housing new starts to FY11" will **not** impact or impede proceeding with the development of four new projects through Round III of the Next Steps funding. We are grateful to Senator Harp, Rep Gerogosian and the members of the Appropriations committee for restoring Next Steps funding in the 2009 legislative session. We anticipate the announcement of four projects moving forward which will put people to work building and or rehabilitating housing and provide permanent supportive housing to over 100 individuals and families have anticipated closing dates in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2010 and anticipated occupancy between May 2011 and March 2012. The Governor's proposal would allow funding to fully lapse in FY10 and partially lapse in FY11.

While we are very grateful this program will advance, the backward slides in other housing programs cause us to lose ground in the efforts to end homelessness and promote stability for young children and vulnerable people who need housing. The human toll taken by our state's severe shortage of homes for workers, young families, elderly and disabled residents and many others is evidenced in the phone calls many of you receive every day from constituents looking for help and in the news stories of people losing their homes due to foreclosures or facing homelessness because of job losses. Yesterday's front page of the Hartford Courant tells one of hundreds of tragic stories

You are already well aware that Connecticut has a severe shortage of affordable rentals and modest market-rate homes, that prices -- while down about 19% from their peak -- are still not affordable, that 1 in four renters teeter daily on the precipice of homelessness, that 26% of our households are "burdened" by housing costs, that housing prices have helped drive skilled and educated young professionals -- and our children -- from our state, that family homelessness is up, particularly in suburbs and

rural areas, and that our lack of affordable opportunities even extends to our disabled residents and veterans.

Because many of you have been working hard to preserve and create homes for all the people we need in Connecticut, we have made enormous progress in recent years in eradicating and preventing homelessness. Through the Reaching Home Campaign, we have successfully created more than 4,400 units of supportive housing more than 80 municipalities. And we have more than 50 municipalities using HOMEConnecticut to find locations where they can build affordable, energy-efficient homes near transit and other smart-growth locations.

Now that we have ways not to just provide shelter for homeless people but to give them a real, permanent home, not just to build affordable rentals and starter homes but to weave them into the fabric of dozens of communities around the state, we cannot slam on the brakes. The housing programs that have been cut or targeted for cuts offer crucial human services to our most vulnerable citizens and hope for the future of our state. Please don't cause harm or reverse the progress that we have made together.

If you have questions, please don't hesitate to contact the Partnership for Strong Communities.

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The Partnership for Strong Communities operates the HOMEConnecticut and Reaching Home Campaigns and oversees The Lyceum Resource and Conference Center.

[www.ctpartnershiphousing.com](http://www.ctpartnershiphousing.com)

[www.homeconnecticut.org](http://www.homeconnecticut.org)

[www.ctreachinghome.org](http://www.ctreachinghome.org)

[www.lyceumcenter.org](http://www.lyceumcenter.org)



courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-ct-homeless-1205.artdec08,0,6020324.story

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## HOMELESS IN CONNECTICUT

### State's Lack Of Affordable Housing Hits Home For Family Of Four

By MONICA POLANCO

The Hartford Courant

December 8, 2009

Teeka Plummer is articulate, resourceful and persistent, but for six months, she has searched unsuccessfully for an apartment for herself and her three children.

She has called the state's 211 support line. She has called homeless shelters, her local social services department, nonprofit agencies, housing programs and top elected officials. A housing expert and clinician have made calls on her behalf. Plummer even wrote to Oprah Winfrey.

The reasons for the family's homelessness are unusual — they involve child abuse allegations that Plummer made against her former landlord — but their struggle reflects what Connecticut housing experts have long known: There is a massive demand for affordable housing and not enough resources to fill the need. Connecticut, in fact, has ranked 47th in the nation for new housing per capita since 2000. The state has new luxury retirement communities and four- and five-bedroom homes, but for working families, there are few open doors.

It wasn't until Plummer contacted The Courant that her luck began to change.

On Monday, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and state Sen. Anthony Guglielmo — both of whom Plummer had previously asked for help — called her after a reporter inquired about Plummer's situation.

A Manchester couple has taken in Plummer's family temporarily, but more than 4,000 other homeless Connecticut residents remain in shelters, doubled up with friends and family or out in the cold.

Connecticut has the sixth least affordable rental market in the country, according to a report issued this year by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the Connecticut Housing Coalition. Households here must make nearly \$45,000 a year to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment — nearly three times the salary of a worker paid the minimum wage.

The inadequate supply combined with demand has driven up rental costs, said David Fink, policy director for the Partnership for Strong Communities, a Hartford-based group that works to end homelessness.

"What we really need are affordable rentals and condos and townhomes," Fink said.

## Many Hurdles

Several factors contribute to Connecticut's inadequate supply of affordable housing — defined as dwellings that cost less than 30 percent of a household's gross income.

First, generating public support can be tough, Fink said, especially among communities that mistakenly believe that affordable housing increases the number of schoolchildren and drives up taxes.

The Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University found that most of Connecticut's school budget increases from 2000 to 2005 — a period of prolific construction throughout the country — were unrelated to enrollment or the number of children in a town. To some people, affordable housing means stark, monolithic buildings that would contrast with the look of the typical New England town. But today's affordable housing — from Hartford to Fairfield — is small in scale, high in quality and blends with the neighborhood, said Jeffrey Freiser, executive director of the Connecticut Housing Coalition.

Another barrier is even harder to overcome.

"At its worst, some people see their town line as an immigration border," Freiser said. "And they use zoning to keep certain people out. Therefore, we continue to fight against the hyper-segregation of Connecticut's residential patterns."

Reduced state and federal financing for affordable units — whose construction must be heavily subsidized — also contributes to the inadequate supply.

And the foreclosure crisis has increased the competition. Those vying for apartments include former homeowners, aspiring homeowners who don't meet new, stringent mortgage requirements and tenants evicted after banks seized their landlords' multifamily housing properties.

The most vulnerable residents are those who already were on the edge and now are competing against more skilled workers who have been laid off or who have lost their homes.

Between 2008 and 2009, the number of homeless families in the state's rural and suburban areas increased by at least 33 percent, an alarming figure, advocates said. Many told the advocates that they became homeless because of rental costs. Most of the adults in homeless families said they had no history of hospitalization for mental illness or substance abuse, two problems that have historically been linked to homelessness.

## Hurt By State Cuts

The state's \$337 million budget deficit is expected to hurt existing housing assistance programs.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell has ordered the Department of Social Services to cut \$2.1 million from its housing and homeless services — which includes money for emergency shelters, transitional living and rental assistance — to help close the budget gap.

She also has asked the legislature to eliminate the remaining \$2.4 million in the HOME Connecticut program. The program, approved two years ago, gives towns grants to identify affordable housing sites

and to build units. Fifty towns have received grants to identify sites, but they would receive no additional help for construction — up to \$4,000 per unit — under Rell's proposal.

The legislature is expected to vote on that proposal and others when it meets during a special session Dec. 15.

Fink acknowledged the gravity of the state's budget crisis, but said the proposed cuts would increase the number of people seeking help. The state Department of Economic and Community Development has included HOME Connecticut in its long-range state housing plan, a development that Fink said is at odds with Rell's proposal.

"I feel for the governor and [Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management] Bob Genuario, but this is like avoiding the oil change, and nobody should be surprised when the engine goes out in six months," he said.

Inadequate affordable housing, Fink said, contributes to the state's well-documented exodus of 25- to 34-year-olds, which then leads to a shrinking labor force and aging population.

Fink's group continues to push for the creation of 10,000 supportive housing units — not all of them new — by 2014. Supportive housing — a model the group believes is the most effective and least expensive solution to chronic homelessness — provides residents with affordable rentals and such permanent services as money management and psychotherapy.

"You have to not only eradicate homelessness, you have to prevent homelessness," Fink said. "The way you prevent it is to give people places to live that they can afford."

## 'My Only Hope'

Teeka Plummer's letters to state officials flowed from the heart.

"I am writing to you out of sheer desperation," Plummer wrote to the attorney general last month. "I fear that I have exhausted all other resources and you are my only hope."

In the e-mailed letters, Plummer explained that she and her three daughters became homeless Aug. 31 after their landlord evicted them from their Vernon apartment.

Several weeks earlier, Plummer's daughter told her that the landlord had been sexually abusing her, Plummer said. Police charged the man — whose identity is being withheld to protect Plummer's daughter — with fourth-degree sexual assault and risk of injury to a child. He has pleaded not guilty.

"It certainly tells the story of a woman with enormous courage and fortitude fighting some very severe problems," Blumenthal said after reading Plummer's letter.

Plummer, 32, said she began looking for a new home before police charged her former landlord, but hit one dead end after another. Overwhelmed by the crisis, Plummer said she lost her job as a Kmart supervisor.

She stayed with friends and family and was forced to place her daughters in different homes because of a lack of room. Two weeks ago, Michele and Steven Daunis of Manchester opened their home to the entire family for up to a year, a limit imposed by their landlord. Their decision alleviated Plummer's constant worry about where she and her children would sleep.

"You can't see a family separated like that," said Michele Daunis, Plummer's longtime friend. "My husband and I can't just sit back and allow that to happen."

On Monday, Blumenthal and Guglielmo — whom Plummer had written to in June — pledged to help, calling DSS on her behalf. A caseworker said she was doing her best.

"It's just absurd to me that nobody could have helped," she said, although she acknowledged that some people tried valiantly to find resources for her.

Now, she's focused on helping her daughters overcome the trauma of being homeless. Her 6-year-old, who had been sleeping at a different house, told a friend that her mother had gotten sick of her. Plummer's 4-year-old couldn't understand why her sisters weren't under the same roof. Her oldest, who is 12, became a mother by proxy and now resists rules.

Now, with the help of some political heavyweights, Plummer said she hopes to have her own apartment soon.

"I'm trying to remain hopeful, but it's hard because I've had so much rejection that it's hard for me to get my hopes up about anything."

"But I'm trying," she said.

*\*Editor's note: the headline on this story incorrectly stated the number of people in the Teeka Plummer's family. The headline should read "State's Lack Of Affordable Housing Hits Home For Family Of Four."*

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