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To the Members of the Appropriations Committee
Re: Supportive Housing

Many of us are here today to urge you to restore Housing and Support Services in the DMHAS budget. The \$3.2 million cut to the housing and support services line item (from \$12.6 million to \$9.4million) eliminates 150 new units of permanent supportive housing that would have been created through the Next Steps Initiative.

I want to read to you a letter to Governor Rell which I sent at the end of January, when she opened the Armories during a particularly cold week.

January 23, 2009

Dear Governor Rell,

On behalf of the staff and clients of Columbus House, I want to thank you for opening the State Armories last week when the temperatures dipped to dangerously low numbers.

Columbus House, Inc operates two shelters in New Haven, one year-round co-ed shelter and one winter Overflow Shelter for men. Both facilities are full to capacity, and the Overflow Shelter typically runs beyond. On any given night in the last month, between 100 and 110 men stayed in that shelter with the capacity of 75.

From Thursday to Sunday last week, we sent between 15 and 18 men from the Overflow Shelter to the Armory in Branford for an overnight stay. To do so, we provided transportation through our Road to Recovery Program, a DMHAS funded transportation project that serves clients across the State. It took two trips in the evening to get the men to Branford, and another two trips the next morning to bring them back into New Haven. The City of New Haven has offered to cover our costs incurred with this effort.

The Overflow staff told me how grateful they were that 18 men were able to go the Armory. They said it was a great relief for staff and clients that the Overflow was not so crowded, that everyone had a bed or cot on which to sleep instead of sitting up in a chair all night. No one was turned away; everyone in need has a place to sleep. While it might have been a logistical challenge to move men back and forth to Branford, it was well worth the safety and calm that the relief brought to the shelter.

Monday night, however, when the Armories were closed, we were back up to 108 in the Overflow Shelter and over 80 at the shelter on the Boulevard. And while we all enjoyed 40 degree weather yesterday, the temperatures are going to drop below 15 again tonight. I wonder if anyone will die for lack of shelter. (and as of this reading...there were 122 in that shelter 2 nights ago, 117 last night)

"Homelessness is no joke", as one of the tenants at Cedar Hill has said over and over when he talks about his past. He was homeless off and on for some years and is now housed in permanent supportive housing where Columbus House provides case management support. He spent some time bouncing in and out of shelters, worrying where he would find a bed for the night. Now he has his own: his own key, his own frying pan, his own rent to pay and responsibilities to manage. This man's life has been saved by being in permanent supportive housing.

Permanent supportive housing is a solution that works for hundreds of people in the state. Right now, there are 14 applications for Next Steps funding, ready to dig in and create over 100 new units of housing for people, individuals and families, who are homeless. If approved, the Columbus House application would result in 42 new units of housing. I cannot help but think about those new units when I see the number of people in the shelters. What a difference it would make if we could get these units up and running!

So while I am grateful for the Armories, I have to say that it's not enough. Short term fixes for long term crises are not what we need these days. I urge you to reconsider your decision regarding Next Steps funding. Please think about releasing those funds so that we can provide the housing and services so desperately needed.

Sincerely,

*Alison Cunningham
Executive Director*

What we're asking for here today is housing for families, for veterans, for people with disabilities, all of whom are living in emergency shelters today. These shelters are full now, and we're all bracing ourselves for an increase in demand as the economy continues to decline. We must increase the means by which people can leave homelessness behind, and permanent supportive housing is a proven solution. I urge you to restore this funding for Housing and Support Services in the DMHAS budget.

Thank you for listening.

Respectfully submitted:

Alison Cunningham
Executive Director