



**Testimony submitted December 9, 2009 for
Appropriations Committee Hearing on the
Governor's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan**

My name is Mercedes Soto, I reside at 10 Park Terrace, Hartford, CT and serve as the Director of Housing Services for Community Renewal Team. CRT operates two emergency homeless shelters, McKinney Shelter in Hartford and the East Hartford Community Shelter. These are programs which operate on a very tight budget, meeting the complex needs of individuals and families who are experiencing great stress. Over the past year, we have seen a tremendous increase in the need for these services, and we strongly advocate against any cut in funding to these programs, and the others which service Connecticut's homeless.

In FY 2008-09, McKinney Shelter provided: emergency shelter, comprehensive case management, and medical and mental health services to 684 individuals. McKinney Shelter also provided 66,000 meals to the homeless. Currently McKinney operates at capacity at 88 beds and it is not uncommon to turn away 5 to 9 individuals seeking shelter each night.

In FY 08-09, East Hartford Community Shelter provided emergency shelter, comprehensive case management, and medical and mental health services to 388 individuals, including 134 children. Currently, the family shelter turns away an average of 10 to 15 families/adults per day. This number is up from December 2008 when we were turning away 3 to 4 families/adults per day.

From October 2008 to September 2009 the East Hartford Shelter has turned away over 1,332 individuals, not including children. Of course we refer people to other homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters, but if they do not have space either, they may find themselves on the street or in their cars.

The most daunting challenge facing homeless CT residents is lack of income and affordable housing. Subsidized programs have extensive waitlists. There are currently 112 individuals and families households on the wait list for CRT Transitional and Permanent Supportive Housing Programs. The first person on the list has been on the list since January 2009. Wait lists at other agencies are also long.

Imagine that you are 21 years old and have two children, ages 3 years old and 9 months old. You graduated from high school and have worked some retail jobs paying minimum wage but are currently

unemployed. You have exhausted all cash assistance benefits and don't have anywhere to live. You cannot stay with family or friends because they don't have housing stability or would be violating their lease or could lose their housing if you stay with them. Your children's father is unemployed and cannot contribute. Every family shelter you call is filled to capacity. You have applied for public housing and are on a wait list. You are on several waitlists for housing assistance and the first person on the list has been on the list for one or two years. You are not the first person on the list. Because you are not working or in a training program, you don't qualify for child care assistance, but you cannot work or enroll in a training program without child care assistance. What do you do? Where do you go?

Those who are turned away from the emergency shelters often do not have another option. Many of residents we serve in the family shelter are female, single heads of households with young children who have exhausted all of their benefits from TANF and have no income, limited education and job skills. People who are homeless are like you and me. Without adequate resources and strong community networks, a financial hardship could place any one of us and our families in a similar situation.

Through intensive comprehensive case management, CRT uses all of the resources that are available to connect residents to community services to help them move from homelessness to housing, from crisis to self-sufficiency. The numbers of people who are homeless continue to increase and the demand for services far exceeds the current resources available. Further cuts to services for this most vulnerable population will put a tremendous strain on our communities.

A couple of months ago, a very frail woman in her early 50's showed up at our office. She had recently been released from a rehabilitation center where she was recovering from three open heart surgeries. She had been in the hospital for 5 months and was released to the rehabilitation center where she stayed for 2 months. She was discharged without a housing plan. During the time she was in the hospital she and her domestic partner lost their housing. They lived in his van for a week until she was directed to come to CRT. We were able to find her a bed at the family shelter, however, she was unable to stay because without a nurse visiting daily to assist her with her ongoing health related needs, she would have been at risk. We helped her to apply for programs that could accommodate her health needs, but again she was placed on long wait lists. Ultimately, she left the shelter to stay temporarily on the sofa in the small 1 bedroom apartment of the family member of her partner while she continued to secure assistance and alternative housing.

If you are an emergency shelter provider, turning people away from your doors every night is not uncommon. As soon as a bed opens up, it is filled. The people who come to you for help come from

every race, class, and creed. Some have little formal education and can't read or write well, others have Master's degrees. Some have jobs but cannot afford to rent an apartment. Some are veterans. Others struggle with mental illness, alcohol and substance abuse problems. The State Department of Corrections' van drops customers off right outside the shelter. Men are being released from prison without a housing plan. Some of them are non-violent offenders, others are sex offenders. At a time when people who have job skills, work experience, and education credentials are losing jobs and having difficulty finding employment; those who have limited education and criminal backgrounds find it next to impossible to go back to work. CT residents are losing their homes because of foreclosures, eviction for non-payment of rent. Because of insufficient resources, they are forced to double up with friends and families or sleep in their cars. When the shelters are full and the waiting lists for subsidized, affordable housing are long, people build makeshift shelters and live under highway overpasses, under bridges, in vacant buildings and in parks. When funding to shelters and housing programs are cut, services are cut, waitlists get longer and fewer people are helped to move from the streets to shelter to housing.

If the legislature approves the proposed funding cuts, McKinney Shelter will lose \$187,780 and East Hartford Shelter will lose \$94,315, for a total of \$282,095. Without these resources, we will be forced to cut services at a time when the need is greatest! We urge the legislature to reject these cuts to services and to ensure that we preserve funding to provide the most survival basic needs (shelter, food, safety) the neediest residents.

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a discussion where advocates who have been working to end homelessness for more than 30 years talked about a time when it was not acceptable for anyone to be out on the street with no place to go. One advocate recalled the sense of outrage and urgency people felt when there was one homeless person in the community, let alone 4,000 homeless people. Today, for many, homelessness has become acceptable. In one of the wealthiest states in the wealthiest country in the world, homelessness is NOT acceptable. Cutting funding for services to the most vulnerable populations during a time of financial hardship and increased demand is NOT acceptable.

Please remember the words of President Hubert Humphrey, "The moral test of a government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped."

Thank you for your service.

Mercedes Soto, Director

CRT Housing Services