

**Testimony of David Salazar-Austin Submitted to the
Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature in Support of the
Connecticut Fair Housing Center**

Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this evening. My name is David Salazar-Austin. I am a litigation associate at Day Pitney, LLP in Hartford. I wish to testify in support of renewed funding of \$227,500 for the Connecticut Fair Housing Center.

In my nearly 7 years of practice, I have worked primarily as a litigator in our firm's Labor & Employment Department. In that capacity, I have worked closely with state and federal anti-discrimination laws—laws that protect people not only in the employment context, but in the housing context as well.

After attending a seminar on the state and federal fair housing laws hosted by the Connecticut Fair Housing Center and with the support of my firm, I volunteered to take on a Section 8 housing discrimination case. The Center asked us to draft a complaint and pursue the prospective tenant's case in Superior Court, with Greg Kirschner, an attorney with the Center, supervising our work.

Our client, a single mother of two young children, had attempted to use her Section 8 voucher to rent an apartment at an East Hartford complex. The apartment complex's front office, however, informed her that the landlord would not rent to anyone using a Section 8 voucher. She called the Center to inform them of what happened, and the Center quickly sent out testers – two people identical in every way except one told the landlord that she had Section 8 and the other did not – to determine whether the complex was in fact discriminating against potential tenants with Section 8 vouchers. The testing evidence suggested that our client was not the only one who had been victimized by the complex's mistreatment of people with Section 8 vouchers.

Although our client's claims were strong and she believed she had been wrongly treated, she faced a language barrier and she didn't fully understand that the apartment complex had violated her legal rights under the fair housing laws. Much of our efforts were geared towards helping her understand her claims, and giving her the confidence to proceed with litigation rather than accept an unfair settlement offer. Attorney Kirschner provided invaluable assistance in reinforcing with the client that we were on her side, and that her claims were strong. We pressed forward with discovery and ultimately convinced the defendant to pay out a substantial settlement to compensate our client and assure that she was able to live where she felt it would be best for her children. This outcome was possible only because the Connecticut Fair Housing Center was able to leverage its own resources by partnering with my firm, and because the Center had set the case up so well through its efforts in gathering strong testing evidence.

Since the conclusion of that case, I have continued to be involved in the Center's efforts, both as a member of the Center's Board of Directors, and as outside counsel retained on a pro bono basis to assist new clients. In fact, I am currently working with the Center to assist a severely disabled woman rent an available, handicapped accessible apartment for which she was previously approved, but which has been denied to her for several months now. That matter remains in its infancy but highlights again the good work that the Center, in conjunction with local firms, is doing on behalf of individuals throughout the state.

In summary, the Center's work not only provides great benefits to its clients, but its efforts to obtain pro bono counsel also bring tremendous resources to bear on behalf of citizens of Connecticut who have faced discrimination. Without continued State funding, the Center's ability to leverage these types of resources will be severely hampered.

I strongly encourage the Appropriations Committee to renew funding for the Connecticut Fair Housing Center. An investment to discourage housing discrimination at a time when economic circumstances will compel unprecedented numbers of people to seek alternative housing is crucial.