

Testimony of Atty. Amy Eppler-Epstein  
New Haven Legal Assistance Association  
426 State Street, New Haven, CT 06510  
203-946-4811

In Opposition to HB 5371  
"An Act Concerning Pilot Program for Affordable Housing Replacement"  
March 4, 2010

I have been an attorney at New Haven Legal Assistance, specializing in housing law, for more than two decades. During that time, I have represented thousands of tenants who live in public housing in this state. Through the lives of these clients, I know how critically important it is to have public housing: housing that is affordable to very low income people, housing that will provide a place to live to people who are poor, sometimes disabled, and would most likely be homeless were it not for the shelter that public housing provides, because they could not afford housing on the private market based on their income.

Over the years, I have seen housing authorities throughout New Haven county seek to demolish some of their public housing, for a variety of reasons: sometimes laudable ones, like the desire to replace old, dilapidated buildings with new and improved housing for poor people; other times for much more disturbing reasons, like a desire to drive poor people out of a particular neighborhood or town.

I have taken the time to come here today, because the proposal in HB 5371, to allow housing authorities to demolish public housing and replace **only half** of the demolished units, is a frightening step backwards in the efforts to create and preserve affordable housing in this state. It seriously weakens one of the few legal tools advocates have at their disposal to ensure the preservation of our existing supply of affordable housing. Anyone who spends a minute comparing the income of a minimum wage worker with the price of housing in this state, or looks at the growing number of individuals and families living in our homeless shelters, will have no doubt that **Connecticut needs more, not less, affordable housing**; we cannot afford to let housing authorities demolish those bricks and mortar resources that we have, and only require them to replace **half** of the apartments they demolish. Once those hard units of housing are torn down, unless the law requires them to be replaced, they are lost forever.

In the past 5 years, I have represented three different tenant associations in their negotiations with housing authorities regarding proposed demolition of public housing. In those negotiations, I have become well aware of how difficult it is to find the funds to rehabilitate or rebuild public housing. I have seen how important CGS 8-64a is to tenants: the DECD hearing process, and the statute's requirements that housing authorities consult with tenants and allow for their participation, has given tenants some voice, and has forced some housing authorities to include tenants in their planning process and negotiate with the tenants and their representatives. In one case in which I was involved, it was only because of this DECD approval

process that the tenants were able to require the housing authority to revise its plan, and increase the number of low income affordable replacement units in its proposed plan for redevelopment. I have also seen the limitations of the act, particularly insofar as it allows housing authorities to replace actual "bricks and mortar" units of public housing with "tenant-based rental subsidies." In many communities, where there is a limited supply of rental housing, allowing the demolition of public housing and replacing such units with a rental subsidy in effect becomes a requirement that the tenants move out of town.

I am not unaware of the financial difficulties facing many housing authorities, or the difficulties in finding funding to rehabilitate public housing or build new subsidized housing that is affordable to low income people. But if my experience over the past 5 years shows me anything, it shows me that it can be done; but it will not be done, unless it is legally required.

Our existing, limited supply of low income public housing is too valuable of a resource to allow it to be destroyed without being fully replaced. I urge you to reject HB 5371.