

**TESTIMONY OF CYNTHIA WATTS ELDER
IN SUPPORT FOR CONTINUED FUNDING FOR THE
CONNECTICUT FAIR HOUSING CENTER**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today about the Connecticut Fair Housing Center (“Center”). I am here to ask that you approve \$227,500 in funding so that the Center can continue its important work. Among this work, funding will allow the Center to continue to its fair housing testing program and its services to the hundreds of Connecticut residents who contact the Center each year seeking assistance.

My name is Cynthia Watts Elder. Until fairly recently--when my term expired and I rotated off the Board of Directors--I proudly served as Co-President of the Center with Phil Tegeler. During 1999 to 2003, I served as the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. Prior to that, I served in various government posts, including working in the Office of Policy and Management, and Department of Environmental Protection. I currently work in the private sector as in-house Counsel.

I grew up in Stratford. In high school, while I recognized that I was one of the few African-Americans in my school, I did not believe I ever experienced discrimination. When I decided to attend law school at the University of Connecticut School of Law, I was again one of the few African-Americans in my class. As part of my law school studies, I participated in a clinical class and became a fair housing tester. Fair housing testing is a proven means of investigating housing discrimination that involves pairing two people who have similar characteristics, except the characteristic being tested – like race, and assigning them to view apartments or houses. The results of the test allow an organization like the Center to assess whether the two people are offered the same apartments on the same terms and conditions. This technique has been recognized by the Supreme Court of the United States as an appropriate way

to accurately assess how people are treated as they look for housing. *Havens Realty Corp. v. Coleman*, 102 S. Ct. 1114 (1982).

As a tester, I sought apartments in Hartford's West End. While considering units, I was treated cordially and believed I had been treated fairly and that I had the same chance as the white woman with whom I was paired of getting the units I sought. After completing the test, I learned that my white partner was offered units on better terms than I. In short, I had been the victim of housing discrimination. I was shocked when I learned what had happened. I had always believed that I was offered the same opportunities as others who had similar education and income. I could not believe that my opportunity to live in a particular neighborhood would be limited by the color of my skin. As the result of my law school experience, I filed a complaint with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities; and that testing experience sparked a lifelong interest in combating employment and housing discrimination. While serving as the Executive Director of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, I contracted with the Center to provide testing services in large part because of my law school experience and the Center's stellar reputation as it related to advocacy in general and testing for housing discrimination in particular.

I am here in support of the Connecticut Fair Housing Center because I know their work and I know that they are making a real difference in ensuring that families and individuals in Connecticut are not denied housing because of the color of their skin, the fact that they have children, are from another country, or receive a housing subsidy. It is unfortunate that an organization like the Center still gets hundreds of complaints from the victims of housing discrimination each year. I urge you to continue the Center's funding, because without their investigative and advocacy staff, more housing units will be closed to people who deserve them and can afford them.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.