

The Health and Hospitals Appropriations Subcommittee Chairs and Members  
February 18, 2009

My name is Suzy Rivera. I am the Outreach Programs Director of the Friendship Service Center of New Britain.

Supportive Housing in Connecticut and across the country has proven to provide cost effective care for homeless individuals with physical and psychiatric disabilities. For 15 years, Connecticut has wisely invested in 2,600 Supportive Housing units, bringing federal and private dollars into the projects by these investments, and providing stable housing to our most vulnerable neighbors.

Currently, Supportive Housing investments are at risk, not by direct budget cuts, but by cuts caused by deficit mitigation. And, the risk is always there of direct reductions. Any reduction to Supportive Housing would be financially foolish and severely detrimental to our vulnerable neighbors, single people and parents, and the children who live in those units.

With the potential closing of institutions providing housing for people with substance abuse and psychiatric disabilities, even more vulnerable adults and children may need a place to live and case managers to provide guidance. With probable significant cuts in DSS Programs of Emergency Shelter, Transitional Living, Rental Assistance (RAP), Eviction Prevention, Security Deposit Guarantee, and other such programs, support will simply not be available.

It is often expected that the Federal Housing Choice program (formerly known as Section 8) will provide rental assistance to low income people. Many disabled people have had Section 8 certificates. They have sustained their housing tenuously because of mental health disabilities, addiction, physical disabilities and other issues. However, the Federal Housing Choice programs tend to be over-subscribed. Vouchers have been consistently reduced over the past 10 years through attrition. Waiting lists are seldom open. Over the past year, 3 waiting lists have been open with applications far exceeding available slots which are usually chosen by lottery. None of these open waiting lists have been in New Britain. In New Britain, the Housing Choice waiting list has not been open for many years. There are currently 751 vouchers. Some people have been on that waiting list since 2002.

The public housing waiting list is growing. Just last week, in discussion with the Housing Authority about 2 households, I learned that someone getting on the public housing list "now" can expect to wait for well over a year to get into a 3-bedroom apartment. They would not even guess at a time because the list is so long. For a one bedroom apartment for a disabled client, the "best guess" is that it will be about a year.

Thus, we cannot expect any relief for these disabled individuals from these federal housing programs.

In New Britain, shelter numbers are up. At the Friendship Service Center of New Britain, our shelter overflow needs are well beyond capacity. Our Community Soup Kitchen is feeding more and more people each month. Our Emergency Needs Program struggles to provide a tiny bit of financial assistance to a rising number of people. Even with our Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (the Federal Stimulus money), our community is in crisis. People seeking assistance have longer work histories and independent housing stays. Formerly stable people are moving into instability. People are facing the choice of doubling up or dying. But, doubling up sometimes causes another household to be at risk of eviction or losing a valuable housing certificate. This is affecting the "working poor," landlords, as well as those with addictions and medical or psychiatric disabilities – our most vulnerable neighbors.

We know that Supportive Housing and Case Management services work. It is a proven economic fact that it is cheaper to provide an apartment and services to a individual or family struggling with addictions and medical or psychiatric disabilities than it is to have those same individuals or families living in shelters or on the streets. The cost of shelter, emergency care, ambulance services, and other such costs adds up dramatically.

But, it is not only about a financial savings. The impact of such a life is devastating. In New Britain, I see lives changed and people stabilized by the financial and case management support provided by Supportive Housing.

One young woman I know was released from foster care to live with her disabled mother because of Supportive Housing. Though incredibly smart, she was very rebellious during her teen years. Her grades dropped, she got pregnant, and dropped out of school. Poor behavior continued. Outreach to her, Case Management support, and Supportive Housing support for her family. After a several years struggle, she decided she did not want her son to grow up with the barriers she had faced. She accepted offered assistance of her Case Manager. She has obtained her high school diploma, was connected to a job by her Case Manager through an employment outreach program, has obtained a certificate in clerical administration, is pursuing a bachelor's degree in college, while she and her child live in an apartment for which she pays herself. This journey was made in the arms of a Supportive Housing program, which continues to provide her mother and a sibling with a stable home.

Another person I know has a significant mental health disability. His ability to make rational decisions and control his impulses is severely limited. If he visits the hospital and is not given his house keys upon discharge, he may break down his door to get inside. Not because he is mean or destructive. He does not want to bother his neighbors and that is the only way he can think of to enter his home. His landlord has acknowledged that were it not for the Friendship Center being in charge of his money, the financial Supportive Housing support, and the presence of his Case Manager to help him work through the decisions of daily living many of us take for granted, the landlord would have kicked him out years ago. Instead, through the partnership of Supportive Housing, he has had a stable home for over three years. This vulnerable man has a more supportive network than he has had in his life because of Supportive Housing.

Supportive Housing works! It should not only be maintained at its current level in the present economy, but also expanded. It is the right thing to do economically and emotionally. It is financially responsible and compassionate. I strongly encourage you to do the right thing, for our most vulnerable neighbors, and for the financial situation of our entire state.

Thank you.

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