



Testimony to the Select Committee on Children
by David Fink, Policy Director, Partnership for Strong Communities
Thursday, March 4, 2010

Representative Urban, Senator Musto, honored members of the Committee,

I am David Fink, policy director of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide housing policy organization that engages civic and political support to solve homelessness, create affordable housing and develop strong, vibrant communities.

I am here today to strongly support Raised Bill 5360, An Act Concerning Children in the Recession and, moreover, the thorough, thoughtful and committed work of the Children in the Recession Task Force. Rep. Urban, Rep. Jarmoc, Elaine Zimmerman, Gary Turco and many others have laid bare the many obstacles low-income children and their families face, obstacles that must be overcome, but obstacles that, frankly, they have faced since long before this recession began.

You have done yeoman's work identifying the education, healthcare, nutrition, employment and social service needs that these children have. The task force report clearly identifies that these children and their families suffer mightily for lack of a safe, secure home. Our emergency shelters are full, the waiting lists for DSS-administered Section 8 vouchers and Rental Assistance Payment certificates is 8,000 families and 3-6 years long! There is, in short, no room at the inn for these children.

This bill will help them enormously, and I will not take your time reiterating its many strengths. I have just a few suggestions.

1. The Leadership Team proposed in the bill is a good idea. We have found that the Interagency Council on Supportive Housing and Homelessness, which brings together many of the same agencies, has been a productive vehicle for the creation of supportive housing. We suggest the agencies involved in housing creation – DECD, CHFA and OPM, which oversee the Housing Trust Fund, the HOMEConnecticut program, grant-making and other housing related efforts – be represented.

2. We commend the committee for Sect. 4, which instructs the agencies involved to impede homelessness and improve housing conditions by continuing rental assistance, providing foreclosure prevention, and offering incentives for affordable housing creation – all within “available appropriations.”

As you know, of course, those appropriations are not all that available. And what is available is not enough to deal with the problem. As I said:

- Shelters are at 100% of capacity. And of the 10,241 clients served in shelters last year, almost 1,300 were children, according to the CT Coalition to End Homelessness.
- Rental assistance: 5,700 households are on the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers and 2,350 are on the waiting list for RAPs through the Department of Social Services. Meanwhile, local housing authorities maintain their own waiting lists which remain closed. When the state opened those waiting lists in 2007, 50,000 households applied for assistance that, today, remains out of their reach. We would all like a homeless child or family to get a voucher or RAP to immediately find a place to live, as this legislation nobly recommends. That is not going to happen. The waiting list is 6 years long for the former, three years long for the latter.
- I should also point out that tens of thousands of families in CT are not in shelters, but are “this close” to homelessness. 26% of all households earn less than 80% of median income and spend more than 30% of that income on housing. But unbelievably, 100,000 renting families earn less than 50% of median and spend more than half that meager income on housing. They live in old, asbestos- and lead-laden apartments, spending too much for overcrowded conditions, usually in cities and neighborhoods with overburdened schools and few programs or services for children and families. The loss of a job, or even a paycheck, and they are on the street or in a shelter.
- The bottom line is that we need a greater supply of housing units tied to a greater supply of vouchers. Connecticut is 47th in the nation in units built per capita since 2000. What we have built isn't for children in a recession, but rather large single-family homes and expensive 55-and-over retirement communities that, frankly, don't want children.

We at the Partnership for Strong Communities want to thank you very, very much for your heartfelt concern and very hard work. Currently, significant housing rehabilitation is happening with limited capital resources to keep existing units available and affordable. The state could enhance this investment by dedicating Housing Trust Fund dollars or other capital sources to create habitable, energy-efficient dwellings for children and families. That investment could also provide jobs for parents and ensure that children in safe homes perform better in school and feel a sense of security in their lives. For the sake of these children, we hope you will ensure they have an appropriate, affordable place to live. An emergency shelter is no place to do homework and sleep peacefully.

Thank you.