

Testimony of Kim McLaughlin before the Connecticut Legislature's Housing Committee in Support of House Bill #6461, Senate Bill #1076, and Senate Bill #1075

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My name is Kim McLaughlin. I am an organizer for the CT Housing Coalition and the CT Public Housing Resident Network, Inc. (PHRN).

Many CT Housing Coalition and Public Housing Resident Network staff and leaders have spoken to you today in support of House Bill #6461, An Act Concerning the Selection of Tenant Commissioners, Senate Bill #1076, An Act Concerning Resident Participation in the Revitalization of Public Housing, and Senate Bill #1075, An Act Concerning Public Housing Grievance Procedures. I am not here to repeat their reasoned arguments.

I am here to let you know that all three bills are borne from the collective experience of our members in pursuit of their rights and responsibilities as residents who care very deeply about their community. While attempting to work with their Tenant Commissioner to address community-wide issues of concern, participate in the planning and implementation of the revitalization of their community, or utilize their housing authority's grievance procedure in order to challenge a perceived wrong, Public Housing Resident Network members have worked within the established state and federal public housing systems available to them. House Bill #6461, Senate Bill #1076, and Senate Bill #1075 represent their experience-based suggestions for preserving and improving those systems in order to encourage more positive resident participation in the betterment of both the state and federal public housing systems in Connecticut.

In Wallingford, the current Resident Commissioner was vetted by the Republican Town Committee and appointed in November 2010 by the Town Council without any participation by residents living in the Authority's six public housing complexes. Since her appointment, the current Resident Commissioner has attended only three of the eight WHA Board meetings that have been called. In addition, the current Resident Commissioner has yet to meet with the Resident Association, although the organization has requested a meeting by telephone, e-mail, and by USPS certified mail. It is no surprise that Wallingford public housing residents are feeling disrespected, disenfranchised, and discouraged about improving their communities. Passage of House Bill #6461 would help to positively address the situation.

Without minimum standards for tenant rights and a grievance procedure being established in accordance with C.G.S. Section 8-68f, dozens of different policies and procedures exist across the state. I want to bring your attention to just one of many questionable grievance procedure policies that are currently in effect in our state. In Wallingford, the grievance procedure calls for an informal discussion to take place between the grievant and the Authority as a first step in the process. The informal discussion would be an excellent beginning to the process, except that the WHA's standard modus operandi is to employ to services of an attorney and a state marshal to produce and serve a notice that suggests a day, time and place for the informal discussion. The attorney and marshal fees are to be charged to the grievant if the grievance is ultimately ruled against him/her. There is no reason that legal and marshal services should be used to schedule an informal discussion when a simple phone call or e-mail would suffice. The only reason to use such services is to intimidate and discourage residents from utilizing the grievance procedure at all for fear of losing the grievance and having to pay attorney and marshal fees.

The old saying "the devil is in the details" applies to the rights of the state's public housing residents. Although C.G.S. Section 8-68f guarantees public housing residents their rights and a grievance procedure, without the establishment of detailed standards for those rights and that grievance procedure, public housing residents are not in fact protected. We urge passage of Senate Bill #1075. We would also request that the Public Housing Resident Network be allowed to participate in the process of finalizing the minimum standards. We believe that our members' experience would be invaluable to the process.

Thank you.