



**Joint Committee on Housing, February 3, 2015
Testimony of Alicia Woodsby, Partnership for Strong Communities, on Youth Homelessness and
Housing for People with Disabilities**

Good afternoon, chairs and members of the Joint Committee on Housing. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I'm the Executive Director of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide nonprofit policy advocacy organization dedicated to ending homelessness and expanding affordable housing to strengthen Connecticut communities. The Partnership staffs two statewide campaigns to end homelessness and expand affordable housing – Reaching Home and HOME Connecticut, respectively. Our leadership in housing policy development, advocacy and research in Connecticut gives us a unique and well-founded perspective on several of the bills you have before you today.

The Partnership for Strong Communities **strongly supports the intent of HB 408, An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness**, to ameliorate homelessness among youth in our state. **We oppose SB 170, 409, and HB 5583, 6144**, which all serve to limit access to state funded elderly/disabled housing for people with disabilities.

Youth Homelessness: Addressing the needs of runaway and unaccompanied youth is a major area of focus for the Reaching Home Campaign that manages a statewide Workgroup dedicated to the development and implementation of a multi-faceted approach to tackling this issue.

In December 2013, Reaching Home supported the release of the state's first comprehensive study and report on runaway and homeless youth developed by the Yale Consultation Center. We know from the study that these youth touch multiple state systems with limited levels of obligation or responsibility for their well-being. There is a clear need for interagency plan to address this issue, as called for by this bill.

The Study quickly identified a cohort of 98 unaccompanied youth who were homeless in Hartford, New Haven, New London, and Bridgeport. 32% of the kids in the Study had dropped out of school; 23% of these youth first had sexual intercourse at age 12 or under; 50% were arrested at least once in their lifetime; and about half of the young people reported family contact with DCF. These young people had experienced multiple traumatic events, including rape, being attacked with a weapon, and the murder of a close family member or friend, among others. 25% of these kids considered suicide over the prior year.

The Department of Housing is a critical partner in this process due to their role administering the housing assistance continuum for adults and families. It makes sense for them to support the development of a similar array of options appropriate for youth, especially since runaway and homeless youth often hide from child welfare and will not engage with the child welfare system. Some youth become homeless due to family homelessness as a result of poverty, which is not a reason for child welfare involvement under CT statutes.

Youth experiencing homelessness often face numerous obstacles to obtaining housing security, and there are extremely limited crisis options in our state. We must continue to work to address the immediate need for crisis response services by building on and expanding the funding that was restored for the Homeless Youth Program in 2014. Essential to this work is our ability to develop more adequate data on the scope and nature of the problem

Traditional means of collecting data on this population are ineffective. Youth who are homeless are more difficult to track down than their adult counterparts and are often unwilling to talk to the adult volunteers who seek to engage them. Consequently, we have a poor understanding of the scale of the issue and difficulty in effectively serving this population. Through Reaching Home, and the leadership of the CT Coalition to End Homelessness,





Connecticut is currently conducting the first statewide youth count. This is a major step toward developing more comprehensive state data about this population and their needs.

Elderly/Disabled Housing: By law, the definition of “elderly” includes people with disabilities in state funded elderly housing, which is now commonly referred to as “elderly/disabled” housing. Restricting access to this type of housing for people with disabilities would eliminate housing opportunities for a population in significant need and is discriminatory. Disruptive behavior can occur with a variety of conditions impacting people across the lifespan.

Instead of eliminating options for vulnerable populations, we should be promoting access to services for all residents and mutual understanding. Effective solutions include the creation of more scattered site supportive housing for persons with disabilities, and flexible service dollars to be paired with subsidized housing units for people in need of support.

Connecticut is currently on track to end Veteran and chronic homelessness by the end of 2015 and 2016, respectively – restricting access to this housing option for people with disabilities will push more people into homelessness and reduce the state’s ability to meet the needs of these two populations.

We know that homelessness amongst this population leads to overutilization and high costs in other state funded areas, such as Medicaid, emergency room and hospital, behavioral health, and criminal justice costs. An increase in their housing instability and homelessness at this critical juncture will also reduce our capacity and slow our progress in reaching other homeless populations such as families with children and unaccompanied youth.

Rather than limiting options, we need to continue to focus on the creation of more affordable housing for individuals who are extremely low income (at or below 30% of the area median income). 69% of households making less than 30% of AMI spent over half of their income on housing in 2012 – making them severely housing cost burdened. Those households remained perilously close to homelessness.

Thank you for your time.

I’m happy to answer any questions.

