

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the Housing Committee
February 3, 2015**

Regarding

SB No. 408, AN ACT CONCERNING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS that aims to ameliorate homelessness among youth.

Good afternoon Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee, my name is Susan Kelley and I am the Public Policy Manager of Child/Adolescent/Young Adult Issues for NAMI Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is that state affiliate of NAMI, the largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all individuals and families affected by and/or living with mental illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for improved access to quality services and the end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. I am here today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut, and as a representative of the Keep the Promise Children's Committee KTPC of whom NAMI CT is a member and acting fiduciary. KTPC is a part of the Keep the Promise Coalition (KTP), the largest group of mental health stakeholders with a united voice for smart policy change concerning mental health issues in Connecticut. I am here today to comment on **SB 408, An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness**.

We support SB 408. Currently homeless youth have few places to go because there is no crisis response system to provide temporary shelter and supportive services for kids in Connecticut. Over the past two years, the *Reaching Home Homeless Youth Workgroup (RHY) of Opening Doors-CT*, comprised of numerous stakeholders including state agencies, numerous advocacy organizations, school districts, and charitable entities, has made significant strides toward addressing this critical need through its development of a statewide blue print serving as the foundation of a strategic plan, which will be released soon, to prevent homelessness among Connecticut's youth and young adults.

It is appropriate that the Department of Housing (DOH), due to their role of administering the housing assistance continuum for adults and families, be a critical partner along with other state agencies and collaborative efforts in developing a similar array of options for youth who are experiencing homelessness.

We don't know exactly how many Connecticut youth are impacted by homelessness, but later this month the first statewide homeless youth count is being conducted through the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. This is an important step that Connecticut is taking to develop more comprehensive state data about this population and their needs. This data will build on the Housing and Urban Development's 2013 Point in Time Count that estimated 4,506 individuals were homeless across the state of Connecticut, including 341 youth and young adults ages 18-24.

We DO know, though, that youth who experience homelessness are extremely vulnerable and prone to exploitation. Based on the 2013 *Invisible No More* study, homeless youth:

- Have a high prevalence of physical and mental health issues: depression, suicide attempts, mental health and substance abuse disorders;
- Drop out of school at high rates (32 %)
- Are sexually active with an average of 5.6 sexual partners (89 %)
- Have been arrested at least once (50%)

- Have been in jail, prison, juvenile detention or a residential facility (39%)

Importantly, last session the legislature and Governor Malloy approved \$1 million for DCF to provide crisis out reach services, drop in, and respite options for kids in Hartford and other areas. This, along with the dedication and collaborative efforts of private housing advocacy groups and charitable organizations such as the Melville Charitable Trust, is helping. Greater commitment and sustained state efforts, though, are needed to ensure that Connecticut youth have a place to go for shelter and receive the supportive services they so badly need.

Thank you very much for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Kelley
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Staff to the Keep the Promise Coalition