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Date: March 16, 2015

To: Hon. Eric Coleman, Co-Chair
Hon. William Tong, Co-Chair
Members of the Judiciary Committee

From: Sarah Fox, Manager of Advocacy and Community Impact Initiatives, Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness

Re: Opposition to Raised Bill S.B. 1087, An Act Concerning Sexual Offender Registration Laws, Residency Restrictions for Sexual Offenders and Reentry Housing

Good morning Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Sarah Fox and I am the Manager of Advocacy and Community Impact Initiatives for the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. CCEH is a statewide advocacy organization founded in 1982 by shelter staff and volunteers in response to increasing homelessness in our state. We represent more than 75 nonprofit providers of shelter and services to end each case of homelessness in our state.

On behalf of the providers who serve the homeless, and on behalf of the 14,000 people who will experience homelessness in Connecticut each year, I respectfully request that you record and consider our opposition on Proposed S.B. 1087, An Act Concerning Sexual Offender Registration Laws, and Residency Restrictions for Sexual Offenders and Reentry Housing.

The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness supports the aim of revising the state's sex offender registry. This registry is intended to be a tool to enhance public safety. There are important best practices that have emerged over the last decade with regard to how a sex offender registry process may be used as a tool to enhance public safety. Chief among the emerging wisdom is the recommendation that states should move from an offense-based system, like Connecticut's current system and the one proposed by S.B. 1087, to an evidence-based risk assessment system. Moving to a risk-based registry would result in differentiating those individuals likely to pose a high threat to public safety from those individuals likely to pose a low risk to public safety.

Available data indicates that including low-risk offenders in the registry does little to meaningfully protect public safety. Further, inclusion of low-risk offenders on the registry impedes their ability to secure adequate housing, employment, and rehabilitative opportunities. Research is clear that the destabilizing impact of being able to secure a place to live, or find and keep a job, may actually move a low-risk offender to a higher risk category. This is the opposite of the intended effect of enhancing public safety.

The exclusion of people on the sex offender registry from so many forms of housing and

necessary services results in homelessness for many. A base of housing security for all is critically important to both public safety and to those who are seeking to exit homelessness to regain stability and security to stabilize the lives of all members of their families. To end homelessness, and to make our communities safer and stronger, we need to increase housing opportunities, not impose further restrictions on low risk individuals whose options are already limited.

Basing the sex offender registry on risk assessment, rather than offense, could make the registry a more effective tool in our collective efforts to create safer communities for all our residents. A risk-assessment based system would mean a smaller number of individuals assessed as “high-risk” on our state registry. The state of Minnesota, which has a risk-based system, has one-tenth the number of people (by population) on their registry as compared to the state of Connecticut. Similar models are in force in Massachusetts and Vermont. Connecticut’s Department of Corrections already administers a highly-credible individualized risk assessment. Public safety in Connecticut could benefit from incorporating this risk assessment into the determination of who goes on a registry.

By focusing the Connecticut registry on individuals at high risk of re-offense, our communities could better target their law enforcement resources. The nearly 6,000 people on the sex offender registry includes many registrants who pose little risk to the community: the public expectation of law enforcement tracking of all those included in the very large registry creates an untenable burden on our local public safety systems. At the same time, the overly inclusive list allows those on the registry who *do* pose real and substantial risk to be hidden from view. To enhance public safety through the tool of the sex offender registry, we need to learn from the data available in this important field of public safety: registries based on risk assessment are better tools that allow targeting of law enforcement resources and limit the unintended and unproductive consequences of registries that do not take into account actual risk.

On behalf of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, our members, partners and the people we serve, I urge you to oppose Proposed S.B. 1087 and move towards a risk based sex offender registry.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

Respectfully,

Sarah Fox
Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness