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Testimony of Representative Susan Johnson

Public Health Committee Public Hearing

March 4, 2015

**Regarding:** HB 6269 An Act Concerning Mental Health Services for Homeless Youth

Senator Gerratana, Representative Ritter and members of the Public Health Committee: thank you so much for taking the time to publicly hear proposed Bill No. 6269, "An Act Concerning Mental Health Services for Homeless Youth."

I represent the 49<sup>th</sup> House District of Windham which includes the Willimantic Service District. The service district is home to three shelters for the homeless. Two of these shelters house homeless families with children. The third shelter is a no freeze shelter for adults only. Windham has one of the largest school achievement gaps in the state. I began to check regularly to see what percentage of the students in the Windham Public School system were homeless. As of last year approximately 3% of our students were determined to be homeless according to the Town human services director.

At a Children's Committee Report Card meeting this last September, it was estimated that approximately 900 families are homeless in the State of Connecticut. The reasons for such large numbers of homeless families include the most economically devastating recession this country has suffered since the Great Depression. Also, there are severe gaps in Connecticut's social safety net that used to better protect low income families from homelessness. And while our state has increased the minimum wage, we know that in order to afford a modest apartment in

this state one would have to earn more than \$20.00 an hour. So our homeless population continues to grow.

Over the last two years, the Public Health Committee has worked to pass legislation that supports behavioral health for school aged students. The latest example includes mental health first aide in SB 1160. Homeless students may exhibit Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms which do not always require de-escalation of behavioral symptoms. Nevertheless, to keep these specially challenged students engaged and learning in a school setting, professionals need to learn to employ behavioral health techniques that address the symptoms of PTSD. According to the National Center On Family Homelessness, these children worry they will have no place to live, or sleep and most who have been or are homeless worry that something very bad will happen to them and their family.

To better address this serious problem, I have proposed Bill No. 6269 which simply provides "That the general statutes be amended to require the Department of Children and families and the Department of Mental Health and addiction Services to work together to identify homeless youth in need of mental health services and connect the homeless youth to such services."

Awareness of the serious difficulties and trauma homeless children face must be raised. If we help our school professionals and state and local government agencies develop strategies that will provide behavioral support to Connecticut's homeless children then we will help these unfortunate youth to end the cycle of estrangement from their families and community, and better ensure their futures as healthy and productive citizens of our state.