



NEW
LONDON **Homeless
Hospitality Center**

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Appropriations Hearing, Conservation and Development
Department of Housing
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As the state of Connecticut navigates the difficult road to a sustainable balance between income and expenses, I urge those charged with this task to remember the needs of our state's most vulnerable. In particular, I would like to speak briefly on behalf of our existing safety net for adults experiencing homelessness.

As you know, many years ago CT eliminated "welfare" for employable single adults. This means that after any unemployment benefits are exhausted, adults in our state who cannot find another job—due to limited jobs, limited skills, physical limitations, mental health challenges and/or a history of incarceration--are left literally destitute. Lack of income quickly leads to homelessness. Without the availability of an effective homeless response system, many of these individuals will be forced to live outdoors or in other dangerous living situations.

We have made tremendous progress in redesigning our homeless response system through the implementation of Coordinated Access Networks (CANs) across the state. People facing homelessness now have one place to call (211) to access services in their region. Homeless service providers now collaborate to begin with efforts at diversion—helping people find alternatives to shelter where possible. Emergency shelters are now functioning more as a system than as independent operators making better use of our shelter capacity. Our whole thinking about emergency services has changed from one of keeping people in shelter to a focus on helping people rapidly transition back to permanent housing. Connecticut leads the nation in these innovative approaches, which are bringing us closer to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Speaking from the perspective of just one shelter located in New London Connecticut these efforts are changing, and even saving, lives. Last year we had 589 entries into our emergency shelter. This number included people as young as 18 and others well into their 70's. Our guests included men and women of every ethnic group and race. Some came to us directly upon release from prison while many ended up homeless after a lifetime of employment. Many had navigated long struggles with chronic diseases, mental health challenges and addiction.

But what they all shared was the reality that they were without a place to call home. What they also shared, however, was the reality that they live in a state that does not abandon its most vulnerable citizens. State investment combined with local funding and private philanthropy allowed us to offer each of these individuals the hospitality they desperately needed to begin rebuilding their lives.

While it is only a large room shared with 20 others, we were able to offer a warm, safe, clean place to sleep. During the day people had access to showers, bathrooms and laundry allowing them to get back into the routines of daily living we can so easily take for granted. We were able to help people begin to plan their next steps by offering practical help in replacing lost ID's, securing a free cell phone, a place to receive mail, access to a computer to begin a job search, bus tickets to start job hunting and referrals to treatment or medical care.

For many, this simple platform was enough to allow them to get back on their feet. Well over half of the people using our emergency shelter stay less than 10 days. For others with more challenging barriers, we were able to go further and offer help in finding affordable housing and for those with the greatest need even access to the long term housing with support services. All these supports are working together to bring Connecticut closer to making long-term homelessness a thing of the past.

Budget documents will easily show what the state spends to address homelessness—these costs are real and significant. What we cannot so easily see, however, is the cost of failing to support our neighbors facing homelessness. The human cost alone is hard to imagine. But failing to address homelessness also costs money as it contributes to increased criminal justice and medical costs. Addressing homelessness costs money but failing to address it effectively would cost even more.

These are hard times that demand change. I recognize that every program receiving financial support from our fellow taxpayers has an urgent responsibility to be more efficient and effective. We need to welcome greater accountability and be willing to change where there are better ways of achieving our shared goals. I believe the homelessness response system is rising to that challenge by reorganizing into more effective collaborations and by changing our approach based on emerging best practices. Much of what we have done in the area of homelessness can serve as a model for other sectors as the state transitions to greater accountability for results.

An investment in solving homelessness is an investment in our people. Thousands have passed through our doors at the Homeless Hospitality Center since we began in 2006. Today the vast majority of these individuals are back on their feet—paying rent, holding jobs, contributing to their community and making our state stronger. With your help we can continue to wisely invest state resources in helping our neighbors in crisis rebuild their lives.

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