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Governor

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

Evonne M. Klein
Commissioner

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSING COMMITTEE
February 23, 2016

Evonne M. Klein, Commissioner
Department of Housing

Good afternoon Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee. My name is Evonne Klein and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Housing (DOH). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you regarding several important bills that impact DOH and the constituents we serve.

DOH Supports H.B. 5338 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION OF RENTAL HOUSING PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS:

H.B. 5338, will statutorily ensure the protection of confidential client information for individuals and families who receive assistance from the Department of Housing. DOH assumed responsibility for the administration of several housing programs that were previously administered by DSS when the agency was created in 2013. The enacting legislation, PA 13-234, did not transfer all of the necessary statutes that accompany the programs. This bill will mirror the client protections already in place under DSS, ensuring that confidential client information concerning individuals and their personal financial information will remain confidential. The Auditors of Public Accounts transmitted their annual report to the legislature at the beginning of this legislative session. Contained within in their report was the recommendation that the legislature adopt this provision. I urge this bill's passage.

DOH Supports S.B. 153 - AN ACT CONCERNING SECURITY DEPOSITS FOR AGE-RESTRICTED PUBLIC HOUSING:

According to C.G.S. 47a-22a, housing authorities are required to return security deposits to tenants after one year of occupancy, even if a tenant chooses to reside in a unit for much longer. This practice defeats the purpose of collecting a security deposit. If a tenant causes damage, then it falls to the housing authority to use their existing resources to repair that unit or units. This can result in housing authorities having to raise rents to cover costs, which effectively burdens the other low-income tenants, most of whom do everything they are supposed to do to

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properly maintain their homes. This legislation relieves these tenants from bearing the costs of those who vacate their apartments in a condition that requires costly repairs. This is a common sense proposal and it's yet another step towards ensuring the financial sustainability of publicly subsidized housing in this state.

However, DOH would not want these security deposits to create a barrier to housing for some of the state's most vulnerable residents. For this reason, we're happy to see that the language before you includes a provision that would exempt current residents from these new security deposit requirements and would also ensure that housing authorities offer flexible payment plans for those potential tenants who cannot afford to make a lump sum deposit at the time of initial occupancy. A security deposit should provide protection to allow a housing authority to remain financially viable; it should not create a barrier to housing for those most in need.

This legislation as drafted, incorrectly names the Commissioner of DSS, it should name the Commissioner of Housing.

DOH Opposes H.B. 5336 - AN ACT ESTABLISHING A PILOT PROGRAM TO PROVIDE MEDICAL RESPITE FOR THE HOMELESS:

DOH does not currently have the funding, nor was funding included in the Governor's budget proposal, to support the programs that would be mandated by HB 5336. With our current allocations, DOH is making significant progress to prevent and end homelessness in Connecticut. Working in collaboration with groups like the Partnership for Strong Communities, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, and United Way 2-1-1 we have developed a successful system designed to identify homeless individuals and connect them with the appropriate support services they need in a swift and efficient manner. For these reasons, DOH cannot support this bill.

DOH Opposes S.B. 157 - AN ACT CONCERNING ADEQUATE AND SAFE HOUSING FOR THE ELDERLY AND YOUNGER PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES:

DOH opposes SB 157, not because of its intent, but because of the fiscal burden it would place on the Department of Housing and other agencies. DOH does not have the staff resources to conduct this study. As a result, the Department would need to hire an outside consultant to conduct this study which would come at a

significant cost. This bill was first introduced in the last legislative session and DOH did not oppose the concept. At that time, DOH was able to identify the additional funding at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services that would be necessary to conduct this study. However, this funding is no longer available.

DOH Opposes S.B. 150 - AN ACT CONCERNING AUTOMATED HANDICAP DOORS FOR ELDERLY HOUSING COMPLEXES:

DOH opposes SB 150 as it is currently written. The draft proposal is vague on the definition of "elderly housing" which would have a significant impact on the implementation of this legislation. For example, if the intent of the term "elderly housing" was to mean large senior developments, with 20 or more units, then this bill would be unnecessary. According to current building code, developments of this size are already required to install automated handicap accessible doors. If the intent of the term "elderly housing" were to be more loosely defined to apply to any elderly residential development then we view this proposal as an unfunded mandate. Many elderly developments are scattered site units, with several small buildings on one piece of property. If this proposal were to move forward with this intent, then it would result in a significant financial burden on local housing authorities and nonprofit housing providers. In addition, the Department of Housing does not have sufficient funding available to pay for the installation of such automated doors on the potentially affected properties, which would likely result in elevated monthly rents for low-income seniors.

DOH Opposes S.B. 156 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

DOH has set goals to end homelessness and increase the stock of affordable housing across the state and we have achieved many of our goals. We have met our goal to end veteran homelessness in December of 2015 and are on our way to end chronic homelessness by the end of this calendar year. In 2015 alone we preserved, rehabilitated and created more than 11,000 units of housing across the state and we did this with our partner, the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority (CHFA). Please keep in mind the Department will be 3 years old in July and the bulk of our development has occurred during those years. To accomplish our aggressive goals, we've streamlined our processes. In the interim we've become more effective and more efficient. Our agency is one of the smallest across state government when you factor in our full time housing staff of 36 and durational disaster recovery employees of 14, but we are having

a big impact. It's not uncommon for our development staff to be working on 20 or more closings at a time, while preparing term sheets, reviewing applications, entering data, and working with applicants in preparation of a funding round. That being said, adding this responsibility without additional staff would greatly slow down the important work of getting the funding "out the door" to produce affordable units across the state for our residents who need a safe, secure, affordable home.

During these challenging times, it is more important that the Department prioritize its core services and continue to take on the active role of transforming the lives of so many individuals and families in Connecticut.

This bill would also require the Interagency Council on Affordable Housing to produce a report recommending a procedure for DOH to collect certain data. Since its inception, DOH has forged relationships with sister agencies, as well as non-governmental groups. These relevant agencies, including representatives from DOH, meet regularly through a number of different coordinated initiatives such as, the Reaching Home Steering Committee, the Reaching Home Coordinating Committee, the Interagency Committee on Supportive Housing and Homelessness, the Veterans Workgroup, the Homeless Youth Workgroup, the Crisis Response Workgroup, the CAN Learning Collaborative, and the Interagency Task Force on Closing the Achievement Gap. Instead of requiring this report by the Interagency Council on Affordable Housing, we suggest that this data collection could be discussed in many of the other venues in which relevant stakeholders who are already collaborating to advance the good work being done to prevent and end homelessness as well as to expand our state's stock of affordable housing. These key stakeholder groups help us identify and deliver our core services and ensure that we are continuing to fulfill our mission. Any additional requirements that are placed upon our agency at this time will hinder our ability to deliver these core services to the population that need them the most.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before you today. I stand ready to answer any questions you may have for me regarding any of the proposals I've just spoken about here.