

Fair Housing Association of Connecticut
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*"A Non-Profit
Organization Working
for Equal Housing
Opportunity"*

Written Testimony Submitted to the Housing Committee

By Margaret K. Suib, Chairman of the Fair Housing Association of Connecticut, Inc.

In Opposition To House Bill 5342

Senator Winfield, Representative Butler, and members of the Housing Committee, thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. My name is Margaret K. Suib. I am the Chairman of the Fair Housing Association of Connecticut, Inc. (FHACT), Connecticut's non-profit membership fair housing organization with more than 150 members. Our membership includes municipal fair housing officers like me who spend most of our time educating residents, trying to reduce incidences of housing discrimination. We also receive fair housing discrimination complaints. Our membership also includes State and municipal officials, landlords, tenants, real estate professionals, bankers, attorneys and others involved in the housing industry.

FHACT and its membership oppose H.B. 5342.

The proposed changes to C.G.S. 46a-86(c) undermine the enforcement mechanism and erode the deterrent purpose of the law which would likely send the wrong message that the State does not recognize the real emotional and psychological impact discrimination has on people.

Recent changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) recognizes that racism and race discrimination can cause post-traumatic stress disorders similar to that of soldiers after war.¹ The evictions and loss of housing that result from discrimination result in children who fall behind in school, parents who lose jobs, and families in a crisis that

¹ <http://www.medicaldaily.com/changes-dsm-5-racism-can-cause-ptsd-similar-soldiers-after-war-246177>

can last for years.² By limiting damages a victim of housing discrimination can recover solely to actual economic losses, H.B. 5342 devalues the deep and lasting harm discrimination causes.

I can tell you that the emotional distress felt by people with children, or with disabilities (who are often also elderly), for example, when their housing is in jeopardy due to discrimination, is real and acute. Where will we go? Will my children and I be homeless, living in a car, on the street, or even separated?

I ask you to take a moment to imagine how emotionally distressed you would be if you weren't sure whether your family would have housing solely because of a housing provider's illegal discrimination. Studies confirm what we know in our hearts: it is unimaginable that people wouldn't suffer real and lasting emotional distress from housing discrimination. Further, our laws allow for emotional distress damages in employment discrimination, and even car accidents. Is housing discrimination which threatens a family's safety and security, and negatively impacts children's schooling and parents' ability to maintain jobs, less serious than a fender bender? I don't think that is the intended message, but that would be the unintended consequence of H.B. 5342

Punitive damages are explicitly ruled out by this proposed bill. Why? Punitive damages are typically awarded only in situations where someone has knowingly violated the law. If a housing provider routinely discriminates against tenants, refusing to rent to Latinos or Blacks, for example, shouldn't there be a real economic deterrent from continuing to violate fair housing laws? People who are aware that their actions constitute illegal housing discrimination and violate the law anyway are not likely to benefit from education: punitive damages is the way the American judicial system punishes those who knowingly violate the laws and encourages them to reconsider their behavior. Weakening the state's fair housing law will discourage victims from

² Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, 2016.