

**David Martineau Testimony**  
**Executive Director of Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation**

**Presented to the Committee on Children**  
**Tuesday, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and members of the Committee on Children, thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony on behalf of Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation in strong support of S.B. 10: An Act Increasing Access to Child Care for Children Who Are Homeless.

Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1983 by the Sisters of Mercy. Our mission is to provide housing assistance and supportive services to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The goal of all of Mercy's services is to help clients reestablish self-sufficiency and obtain permanent housing. Our agency operates eight programs at five facilities in Hartford and Northern Middlesex Counties all focused on feeding and housing individuals and families who are poor and homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

I know firsthand what a positive impact S.B. 10 would make for so many homeless families, and I am pleased to know it is being considered. S.B. 10 would change two early childhood policies to ensure that children experiencing homelessness have easier access to child care services. Streamlining access for these children to child care would benefit both the children and their parents, as their parents work to address the causes of their homelessness and move into permanent housing. Families that are struggling with unemployment and homelessness virtually never find and retain permanent housing unless they first successfully secure employment. Regular, reliable child care is essential for homeless parents who are attending job interviews and working to regain their independence in so many other ways.

This past year, Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation served 4,789 people who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Included in this figure are approximately 200 children, 30 of whom live with their families in our scattered-site supportive housing units in Hartford and Middlesex Counties. For the parents of these children, seeking employment and finding reliable, affordable childcare is one of the most basic aspects of gaining independence, but often one of the most challenging. S.B. 10 would make the journey to independence and employment much more possible for so many families, including those we serve every day in our programs.

The best way to understand the importance and urgency of these policy reforms is through real-life examples. Every client's story is different, but the structural challenges they face are not unique. Our client *Valentina* (pseudonym) moved to Connecticut from Puerto Rico with her two small children to escape a domestic violence situation. Because she had put so much distance between

herself and her abuser, she was not considered at risk, and was ineligible for housing or assistance from domestic violence shelters. She and her children lived on the streets and in emergency shelters for nine months before she successfully found housing through a subsidy program. She was not able to successfully seek employment during this time, because she was not allowed to leave her children at the shelter without her. This bill would have made all the difference for Valentina, because she could have put her kids in child care upon arriving in Connecticut, freeing her to search for employment and attend job interviews. Without this policy in place, Valentina needed to live in emergency shelters for nearly a year, build relationships with fellow members at her church, and make arrangements to leave her children with them while she attended job interviews and eventually found employment.

When Valentina found a job, she was still not eligible for child care until she had proof of employment in the form of a paystub. This meant that even though she finally succeeded in finding child care for job interviews, she now needed 2-4 weeks worth of child care while she worked at her new job. Homeless parents and children need policies that address their barriers to employment and permanent housing. S.B. 10 would do just that.

This bill would create a “protective services” category which means children who are homeless would be “categorically eligible” for the child care subsidy regardless of the parent’s work status. We know at Mercy that this would make a substantive difference for our homeless clients. While the cause of homelessness can vary family to family, the most common reason for homelessness is the inability to afford housing costs. For families with unemployed parents, finding housing is impossible without first finding employment. For this reason, we understand that making homeless children “categorically eligible” for the child care subsidy is a good, common sense measure to enable parents to find employment.

S.B. 10 would also create a 90-day grace period for providing documentation of health and immunization records when enrolling in a child care center, group children care home, or family child care home. Licensing statutes require families to provide this documentation before a child can be enrolled. Often, families experiencing homelessness do not have immediate access to these records. This policy change would ensure a child has immediate access to child care services in these settings.

By helping homeless parents focus on their journey to independence, S.B. 10 is a true acknowledgement of the process by which homeless people achieve housing and employment. Thank you for considering this legislation, which would go a long way to address child and family homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important proposed legislation.

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