



**Testimony from Christopher McCluskey
Vice President of Housing and Community Services, Community Renewal Team**

**Preserving Assistance for the Most Vulnerable
Human Services Subcommittee of Appropriations Committee
February 11, 2016**

Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members and Members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Chris McCluskey, and I am Vice President of Housing and Community Services at the Community Renewal Team, which is the largest Community Action Agency in the state.

I am here to express our deep concern about the Administration’s mid-term budget recommendation to move away from line item budgeting controlled by the legislature and consolidate funding for State Agencies into block grants. In particular, we oppose the elimination of the \$3.1 million Human Services Infrastructure – Community Action line item from the Department of Social Services budget.

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) are uniquely charged with empowering people to take the steps necessary to move themselves and their families out of poverty. We are well known as providers of such basic services as groceries, senior meals, shelter, child care and heating assistance. However, these individual services are not offered in isolation – in silos – but as part of a coordinated and holistic approach that is multi-generational and customer-focused. This service delivery system is called the Human Services Infrastructure, or HSI.

As you may know, the purpose of HSI is to help Connecticut residents “avoid public welfare, get off welfare if they’re on it, stay off welfare, get into the workforce, stay in the workforce, and get help with various critical problems the most efficient way possible.” (CT DSS website)

HSI is the entry-way for anyone in need to get help. While most public funding defines a specific population who may be served, HSI funding allows a Community Action Agency to tailor services specifically to a person or a community in need. We have the ability to help anyone who walks in off the street, regardless of program eligibility. We assign a case manager who will triage basic needs, provide immediate access to emergency services, and link the participants with resources within our agency or through external referrals. Case managers help participants develop short- and long-term goals, and continue to work with them as they move toward self-reliance.

In 2015, the network of 10 CAAs served approximately 347,000 people across all 169 cities and towns of the state. More than 110,000 of those were in households that turned to the Community Renewal Team, which covers 40 communities throughout Central Connecticut. Nearly 20,000 of those people were served using HSI funds. Many of them came through our multi-service centers – two in Hartford and one in Middletown – or through offices in Manchester, East Hartford and West Hartford.



Over the years, CRT has also leveraged HSI funds to create services that filled needs in the community. These are programs tailored to meet the assessed needs of our community – and they could not exist without HSI funds. Here are a few of the highlights of 2015:

- The Fatherhood Initiative helped 140 men reconnect with their families after a period of estrangement or incarceration. Nearly 50 of those men were granted a reduction in back child support debt, because of their successful completion of the program.
- Thirteen low-income individuals purchased homes through an Individual Development Account, or IDA; another started a CT 529 College Plan for her child; and a participant completed a job-training program and purchased a car to get to a new job. HSI funds allow us to provide case management and financial education for participants.
- Housing Counseling helped 63 homeowners prevent foreclosure. HSI funding allows CRT staff to work intensively with homeowners so that they can remain in their properties or move into more affordable and stable housing.
- CRT has created a 14-week Financial Literacy Institute, which covers topics such as household budgeting to establishing/repairing credit, working with a bank, understanding insurance and more. Goodwin College now grants three credits to those who complete this institute.
- An HSI-funded case manager works with homeless families to help them obtain stable housing, find employment, address transportation issues and become more self-sufficient.
- Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) returned a total of \$5,607,559 to customers from federal and state refunds and tax credits; \$514,800 was saved in tax preparation fees. Thus a total of \$6,122,359 was reinvested in the community from this program.

HSI funds are also being utilized in a groundbreaking interdisciplinary initiative that CRT is piloting with Hartford Hospital to increase medical compliance and reduce Emergency Room visits and hospital readmissions among individuals with chronic illnesses. CRT is providing social services and addressing basic needs, embedded in a team with hospital social workers.

The proposed consolidation diminishes the legislature’s ability to advocate for constituents who depend upon the services that I have described. We must work together to preserve the funding that is, in essence, a matter of “pay now or pay later.”

Testimony From:

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