Testimony in support of Department of Housing
Governor’s Proposed Budget FY2020-FY2021 Appropriations Hearing
Wednesday, February 27, 2019

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle, and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Chelsea Ross and I am the New England Associate Director for the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH). Thank you for hearing my testimony today in support of the imperative investments made through the Department of Housing to ensure that those with the greatest needs within our state have a place in the community and the support they need to thrive.

CSH is a nationally recognized expert on supportive housing, an evidence-based, research-backed, approach to serving those in the greatest need with a combination of affordable housing and community-based services. Supportive housing is a subset of the much larger affordable and private housing markets, and represents a small but critical portion of housing and services in our state. As an expert intermediary, CSH brokers strong collaborations and guides agencies, partners, and other stakeholders through training and education, lending, consulting and assistance, and policy reform. Our goal is to ensure that more communities are able to create and operate high-quality supportive housing and to make supportive housing work better for more people—especially the highest-cost, highest-need individuals. We are also key partners in the statewide Reaching Home and Home CT campaigns to create affordable housing and prevent and end homelessness in the state.

Connecticut is a known leader in efforts to successfully address long-term homelessness and prevent future homelessness. The Governor’s proposed budget provides critical funding for housing and homelessness services and supports to help people who face the most complex challenges to live with stability, autonomy, and dignity. The proposed budget includes funding for the DOH Housing/Homeless Services line item at $79.4 million in FY20 and $84.8 million in FY21. This funding is crucial to enable the state to deliver on its responsibility to end chronic homelessness. The funding level preserves funding for the Rental Assistance Program (RAP), an essential resource to aid households who have fallen into homelessness as well as individuals who will transition out of institutional care. By pairing RAP assistance with housing and health stabilization services, individuals and families can quickly return to the community, improving their quality of life while reducing their use of costly crisis and institutional settings.

The funding allocation also includes a vital investment in the implementation of a Medicaid Supportive Housing Benefit for High Cost High Need Individuals. This benefit will provide community integration and tenancy sustaining supports up to 850 individuals who experience homelessness and whose average Medicaid costs exceed $40,000 per year. This small group disproportionately contributes to rising public spending on health care while continuing to experience poor outcomes. The state has the potential to achieve scaled impact—potentially ending homelessness for those with serious mental illness in the state—by targeting a supportive housing benefit to these high cost individuals.

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services supports state designed benefits that acknowledge housing as a social determinant of health and cites evidence from studies demonstrating that providing community integration and tenancy sustaining supports can assist people in reducing utilization of emergency rooms,
inpatient hospitalizations, detox, nursing homes and other high-cost crisis services1. Community integration supports include services needed to help individuals transition from institutions to community-based housing. These services include, among others, screening and assessments that identify households’ preferences and barriers to successful tenancy; development of a housing support plan; assistance with housing applications and housing search; move-in coordination; and development of a crisis plan that includes prevention and early intervention services when housing is jeopardized2. Tenancy sustaining supports help individuals maintain tenancy once housing is secured and include, among others, education and training on tenants’ and landlords’ role, rights, and responsibilities, and assistance in resolving disputes with landlords and neighbors to reduce the risk of eviction. These individualized services support the tenant in achieving sustained, successful tenancy and vary in type, intensity, frequency, and duration, based on tenants’ unique needs and preferences.

By providing these high cost, high need individuals with community integration and tenancy sustaining supports, the benefit is expected to result in a 40% reduction in the Department of Social Services’ Medicaid costs for these individuals, in addition to improved outcomes in their health and personal satisfaction. The net gain to those we serve, to our communities, and to our state is clear: it costs us more in financial and human capital to allow individuals to languish in costly systems than it does for us to invest in their wellbeing in our communities.

Investments in housing and services for vulnerable populations is working. From January 2014 to December 2018, teams of dedicated housing and service professionals decreased the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness by 62% by housing 2,579 individuals. Much of this success is due to the innovative and tireless work of the Coordinated Access Network (CAN) infrastructure, including the 2-1-1 housing unit. The proposed budget includes a Homeless Supports line item which provides the necessary funding to continue the momentum of the CAN systems through data management, streamlining access to available resources, and cross agency, region, and sector coordination. This funding must be preserved. The proposed budget also includes important funding to transition youth experiencing the crisis of homelessness to housing stability via the Homeless Youth line item. The 2018 statewide youth count in estimated more than 5,000 youth experienced homelessness or serious housing instability at some point in the year—an unacceptable experience for us to allow the youth in our state to endure. This funding must be preserved.

Emergency medical services, substance use treatment, shelters, and jails become labyrinths where people without adequate access to preventive services and housing move from one dead end to another in a cycle of perpetual crisis. We have an opportunity as a state to invest our resources in stable foundations. Thank you for considering my testimony and thank you for your commitment to providing the safe, secure, affordable housing and services needed for individuals and families to thrive.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Ross

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CSH