"Providing the most basic of human needs... food, shelter & hope"

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Testimony for the Appropriations Hearing/Department of Housing/February 27, 2019

Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, Representative Lavielle and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for reading and reviewing my testimony today in support of the Department of Housing, and all efforts being made to end homelessness in Connecticut. As we are well aware, Connecticut has made great strides in serving the homeless residents of our State, focused on moving our neighbors in need into housing as rapidly as possible. Our legislative leaders have been determined and dedicated to ending homelessness in CT using fiscal strategies and humanitarianism.

I write as the Executive Director of FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut. FISH NWCT serves our most vulnerable members of our greater Torrington/Litchfield County community, at our 35 bed Homeless Shelter and FISH Food Pantry that has nearly 1800 registered users. Every day we wipe the tears, listen to the stories, give a helping hand up, and sometimes literally save lives. As a non-profit organization, we are dependent on the generosity of the community for donations, and we are very grateful to the State of CT’s DOH for funding approximately half the expense of keeping the FISH Emergency Shelter’s doors open to those homeless neighbors in our communities in economic crisis and desperate need. With a bare bones staff, that funding allows us to focus on our mission of providing the most basic of human needs – food, shelter and hope to those awaiting housing.

The programs and social services at FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of NWCT are critical to some for their survival and well-being. At the FISH Shelter for families, individuals and veterans, which last year had 11,714 bed nights used, we have housed 102 homeless (85 adults, 6 children, and 11 veterans), and have successfully moved 41 former Shelter residents into permanent supportive housing. Our diversity is age – infants through seniors. This challenging success, positively changing and impacting people’s lives, is made possible through the network of a myriad of agencies and providers, starting with a call to 211 and support from the Department of Housing. (You may have seen FISH NWCT featured in the January 2018 edition of Connecticut Magazine - Community Profile – focusing on the stability we provide as our homeless residents await permanent housing in a safe and caring setting.)

Affordably housing Shelter residents is our top priority, made possible through collaborations with other agencies, local landlords, housing authorities, and the FISH Shelter’s two Case Managers. While at FISH NWCT Shelter, we address through case management – medical and mental health issues, lack of insurance, government support programs, joblessness, transportation, family issues, law enforcement problems, and education and life skills – most of which we find collaborators to assist us. We are building the well-being and the confidence of the FISH NWCT Shelter residents so that they receive the positive boost needed to be stable, independent residents and productive citizens of Connecticut.
The DOH and the State’s financial support of FISH NWCT Emergency Shelter allows us to provide a safe, secure haven, in a family friendly communal setting, to folks in desperate need as they await permanent housing. There are “feel goods” every day at the FISH Emergency Homeless Shelter. Any day that we move a resident into their own housing is a celebration, such as John from Cornwall or Jim from Torrington after their heart surgeries; or hearing from 23 year old John who moved into housing two years ago and is excelling in life and states that you are his role model and shares his dreams; or residents enrolling in college and certificate programs through our collaboration with the Northwest CT Community College; or former residents embracing our Executive and telling of their positive life progress and writing letters and sending cards; or the little girl that races across the shelter to hug Santa at our “Cocoa and Cookies” party – saying, “I knew you were real” – showing that we provide hope and dreams. A day that a resident lands a job is also a celebration. Bringing a newborn into the communal setting where everyone is supportive and community churches aid us in gathering the needs of an infant is also a “feel good”. Creating a FISH Family environment means holiday gatherings and celebrating our kids’ birthdays and school graduations; our vets marching in the Memorial Day Parade to a wave of applause; parents maintaining their families; or house members helping each other as we move them into apartments. In our humanitarian work to give a hand up to the homeless, we believe that living in a homeless shelter should be made as pleasant as possible, yet still have expectations of our residents.

All of this - successfully changing the lives of the homeless into productively housed residents of the community - is made possible because of those who care enough about humanity, which includes the support of the Department of Housing and the State of CT, for its fellow citizens. Homelessness is an unacceptable condition for any Connecticut resident, and is an expensive public policy problem. Investing in frontline homeless services and shelters, permanent supportive housing, and support services, helps homeless families and individuals transition into stability and housing – all while saving public funding and resources.

The DOH Housing/Homeless Services line item for fiscal year 2020 – for frontline support of homeless/housing services, outreach, emergency homeless shelters, and the Rental Assistance Program – is essential to help those who are facing the crisis of homelessness and move them as rapidly as possible into permanent housing. Cuts to these services would risk reversing our progress in putting an end to chronic homelessness, and tragically increasing the number of homeless back onto our streets, placing themselves and others in the community at risk every day.

We encourage the State of CT to continue to outreach and give a hand up to our vulnerable, homeless residents at risk. Supporting the homeless and the providers assisting them is the right path to take to avoid tragedy and despair. Please continue to recognize the very human, social welfare challenges of families and individuals facing tribulations. We are so very thankful for the support provided by the DOH and government officials to support all the efforts being made to end homelessness in Connecticut, and for providing hope to those in need. We welcome you to visit FISH NWCT Shelter, and to view first-hand the DOH’s funding and support in action. Please preserve our budget line.

Sincerely,

Deirdre Houlihan Di Cara, Executive Director

FISH/Friends in Service to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut

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