

Public Health Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6653

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING HEALTHY HOMES.

Vote Date: 3/26/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 3/24/2021

File No.: 415

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

The Public Health Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill requires the Department of Housing (DOH) to create a pilot program to provide a minimum of 500 residential dwellings with energy efficient retrofits and residential improvements with the goal of reducing health and safety hazards found in these homes by January 1, 2022. This includes the removal, remediation, and abatement of lead, radon, and other contaminants. This pilot program is funded by annual DOH Healthy Home Fund expenditures of \$500,000 annually for the program and related administrative costs. The DOH commissioner must present an annual report to the Appropriations, Housing, Energy and Technology, and Planning and Development Committees starting on January 1, 2023.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Deidre S. Gifford, MD, MPH, Acting Commissioner, Department of Public Health (DPH):

Commissioner Gifford and the DPH take no stand on this bill other than sharing questions about the training, credentials, and licensing requirements of the professionals hired to perform the energy efficiency retrofits and the health and safety assessments and improvements.

The bill is written to allow the Department of Housing commissioner the ability to contract with qualified professionals, but DPH is already responsible for certifying and licensing these professions and organizations in alignment with current state statutes and federal law established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). DPH looks forward to working with the Committee to clarify the training, certification, and licensing standards used in this program.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Connecticut Hospital Association (CHA):

The CHA supports this bill as part of their efforts to address what are known as social determinants of health (SDOH). Data provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Services has shown that nearly 20% of Connecticut households have at least one of four serious housing problems. These include incomplete kitchens, faulty plumbing resources, overcrowding, and housing costs that require more than 50% of the household income.

A third of homes recently visited by the Department of Public Health had mold concerns. Nearly half lack a functioning stove exhaust fan and vent and over half lack a functional carbon monoxide detector. These are easily addressed issues that can be remedied with the passage of this bill.

The CHA along with Connecticut's hospitals have been actively working to address SDOH and this bill is one step to address the health disparities that come with living in sub-standard housing. They encourage the state to use this bill to address health and safety hazards and improve the long-term health of our residents.

Paul Dworkin, MD, Executive Vice President for Community Child Health, Connecticut Children's Medical Center (CCMC):

Dr. Dworkin and the CCMC support this legislation because all children deserve to live in healthy environments. The Office of Community Child Health at CCMC knows that overall health and well-being is largely determined by social determinants of health and housing is one of those key factors. CCMC has a Connecticut's Children's Healthy Homes Program with licensed and certified experts that focus on remediating health and safety hazards in homes.

This program has been very successful, yet there is still significant need in our communities for additional resources to address these life-threatening health hazards. Nearly 20% of children in Hartford have asthma with nearly half of them suffering from persistent disease. Childhood asthma is the largest proportion of Medicaid spending in Hartford and it's not a coincidence that over half of the housing stock in Hartford is over 70 years old and in desperate need of significant updates and remediation.

Mr. Dworkin and CCMC support this critical legislation and to prioritize our communities with the greatest need that are also suffering from the worst possible health consequences.

Ann Gadwah, Advocacy and Outreach Coordinator, Sierra Club Connecticut:

Ms. Gadwah and the Sierra Club Connecticut support this bill as nearly 30% of homes with low to moderate incomes have one or more environmental hazards present. They know these hazards have a deleterious impact on the health of these already vulnerable Connecticut residents while also preventing full weatherization. Not only are people suffering due to these in-home environmental hazards, but the environment is also suffering due to the wasted resources when trying to heat and cool these homes.

Ms. Gadwah and the Sierra Club Connecticut would like an amendment to this bill to require all appliance replacements to be high efficiency, all-electric alternatives. The benefits of zero-

emission, all-electric appliances benefit not only the residents, but also the planet in both the short and long term.

Susan Miller, Chair, Windsor Climate Action:

Ms. Miller and the Windsor Climate Action support this bill because it will address unmet needs in our communities, remediate health hazards, promote equity, save lives, and save the planet.

Brenda Watson, Executive Director, Operation Fuel:

Ms. Watson and Operation Fuel support this bill as part of their critical mission to support low to moderate income (LMI) residents needs for heat, light, and water. Nearly 30% of the LMI homes have harmful health and safety hazards that cannot be successfully addressed without significant remediation and upgrades. However current state programs, no matter how well intentioned, are not able to address these challenges. This bill will bring greater awareness and additional funding to help with these issues. It is a start in what needs to be a larger conversation about conservation and energy efficiency programs to address the enormous affordability gap between available funds and actual energy costs in the state.

Ms. Watson and Operation Fuel ask that the Committee ask the following questions.

1. How will the application process address equity and availability concerns?
2. What mechanisms are in place to continue this pilot program past the original 500 homes?
3. There are many stakeholders involved and would the Committee expand the qualified contractor requirements to include work experience and training, not just limiting it to higher education credentials? This would provide additional equity and increased workforce opportunities for people in LMI communities.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None

Reported by: Kate Hamilton

Date: April 23, 2021