



June 13, 2024

The Honorable Mayor Elinor Carbone, Andrew Ferguson, and Josh Brown
Co-Chairs, CCM 119K Commission, c/o Connecticut Conference of Municipalities

Re: Unstable housing, homelessness, and poverty

Dear Mayor Carbone, Mr. Ferguson, and Mr. Brown:

Domus appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony on poverty, homelessness, and housing instability. As you know, Domus builds loving relationships with disengaged and disconnected Connecticut young people aged 12 to 26 facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency. For our outcome-producing programs, we commit to working with our youth until they are either employed, on the path to self-sufficient income, or enrolled and engaged in a post-secondary opportunity. In FY23, Domus' youth retention rate was 91%, and 93% of our program graduates were still enrolled in post-secondary education or employed for twelve months after completing the program.

Forty-five Domus staff members came together to discuss this topic and to create this testimony. We wanted to share with the commission our thoughts on the obstacles our youth and families face and offer possible solutions to re-engage and re-connect young people and families in Connecticut.

Regarding the issues of unstable housing, homelessness and poverty, our collective conclusion was that whatever ideas we offer in this testimony will be insufficient, until and unless we address two major factors at a state or federal level:

1. **All Working Adults Must Earn a Living Wage:** According to the Economic Policy Institute¹, a family living in the Stamford/Norwalk metro area with 1 adult and 2 children must earn \$143,315 annually to "attain a modest yet adequate standard of living".
2. **We Need Affordable Housing:** According to this same report, the cost of monthly housing in the Stamford/Norwalk Metro area is \$2,563.00² per month.

¹ **Source:** Economic Policy Institute Family Budget Calculator, January 2024. Data are in 2023 dollars.

² IBID

For reference, 86% of families enrolled in our school engagement program struggle to meet their basic needs, and 22% experience or have experienced housing instability or homelessness. 90% of our families qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

In addition to the above, we see the following as obstacles for our young people and families regarding poverty, unstable housing, and homelessness:

1. There are insufficient resources for families who need additional help meeting their basic needs. There are not enough shelter beds, affordable housing units, or ways in which to support families who need food, clothing, or utility relief.
2. The process for accessing these resources is complicated, intimidating, and never-ending. For example, to get housed if you are homeless, you must navigate the 211 system. This requires you to remain on the phone for hours to connect with a navigator, then you MUST use the exact right language because *“I’m sleeping on a friend’s couch and about to get kicked out”* does not qualify you as homeless. Once you get through the gauntlet of the phone call and use the correct language (*“I’m sleeping on a park bench”*), it often takes months to get into housing.
3. Because there is a lack of affordable housing, families must make dangerous compromises to remain housed. This includes living in unsafe conditions, such as remaining in a situation where there is domestic violence or emotional abuse.
4. McKinney-Vento guidelines seem unevenly understood and enforced. Families, community organizations, and even (at times) school districts don’t understand or follow the McKinney-Vento Act. Domus has worked with school districts that have refused to pay for the education of homeless students because *“they were not living in their district”*.³
5. Teachers and school officials are very sympathetic when homelessness is an imminent crisis; this sympathy disappears when homelessness becomes a chronic condition that means children are coming to school late with dirty clothes and incomplete homework.
6. In our society, homelessness is not seen as something that is an obstacle for young people for which we need to provide accommodations. Expectations for young people—for their state of mind, ability to be on time—do not change based on this traumatic experience which they are enduring.
7. Being poor, living in unstable housing, or being homeless brings about so much anxiety and depression that it makes it difficult to focus on anything except survival. Students are not able to focus on their studies when they are hungry and/or cannot anticipate where they are sleeping; parents are so focused on securing basic needs for their children that it’s a battle to accomplish other tasks.
8. When you have nothing to eat and nowhere to live, your life becomes about surviving. When faced with having no food or stealing food, our young people

³ Through our work at Hartford Residential Center (HRC, formerly Hartford Juvenile Detention Center), Domus works with every school district across the state.

sometimes take what they need for themselves and their families. When faced with keeping their job and leaving their children at home unsupervised, families go to work. These decisions often result in young people and families entering the criminal justice or DCF systems—solely from a lack of sufficient resources, a preventable situation. We recognize that these systems have worked to prevent this from happening, but we still see it occurring.

9. Being homeless means it is difficult to obtain employment or even get a driver's license, since you have no address for anything to be sent to you.
10. For families who are undocumented or for returning citizens, resources are even more scarce. Undocumented families are not permitted to participate in some programs that help; even when allowed to participate, they are often reluctant to do so because of the potential or perceived consequences. Returning citizens on parole need a sponsor to return home. Often this sponsor's home doesn't pass, or the terms of the lease do not permit returning citizens to reside in the residence, thus keeping young people incarcerated due to lack of suitable housing. Youth remain incarcerated longer than they are sentenced if their family is homeless: For a system that acknowledges that incarceration often leads to worse outcomes for a youth, this is depressingly absurd.
11. The process to find out about and then obtain a below-market-rate apartment is akin to winning the lottery, the chances of getting these is so slim. Additionally, *below-market-rate apartment* does not mean affordable—the last time such apartments were released in the Stamford metro area, many Domus employees did not meet the **minimum** threshold to apply.
12. Systems seem deliberately designed to keep people helpless and trapped. Many people need support yet don't meet the stringent qualifications. Others are reluctant to obtain better paying jobs, more hours, or otherwise increase their income for fear of losing the subsidies that keep them housed.
13. Our local housing resources are scarce and require relentless outreach to access services. They require a lot of documentation, do not return calls to families or staff members, and have limited hours, mostly only in the middle of the day when families are working. It becomes a race for us to help families access these resources: We meet families at their job on their lunch hour, so they don't miss work, race over to the housing authority during their open hours, and race the family back to their job so they aren't late returning from lunch.
14. Families have vouchers and cannot find rentals that are willing to accept them.
15. When young people are housed temporarily in hotels, there is often not transportation from the hotel to school. Parents often must work or do not have transportation themselves. Thus, children miss school, are tardy, or fall behind in their assignments. Sometimes families become systems involved due to missed school days/work and/or children being left unsupervised in hotels.
16. Accommodations for people who are homeless are often unsafe and unsanitary. A Domus family was recently given a voucher for a hotel when they became homeless. All their possessions (and they themselves) became infested with

bedbugs from the squalid living conditions. The family stated that they would have been better off sleeping in their car, and that was the decision they would make in the future.

17. Accommodations often have rigid, nonsensical rules. This past year, one of our families experienced homelessness. There was no shelter where the family could be together. The oldest daughter was working a full-time job from 3pm-11pm to help her mom with money, while continuing to attend school full-time. The shelter required that this young woman be at the site by 9pm, which meant she had to choose between shelter and her job. She chose her job and slept in her car.
18. Stamford doesn't have a centralized location/person to go to when experiencing housing instability to help people navigate issues and direct them to resources that could help.

Ideas we have for improving access to housing and helping families meet their basic needs and/or systems we have seen help our young people and families:

1. Have local housing navigators in every community: people who can guide people through issues with landlords and help people understand the resources available in their community related to housing support. This includes:
 - a. helping people access the state's Eviction Prevention Fund (provides eligible households up to 15 months or \$8,500 in a one-time rental assistance payment to cover their rental arrears).
 - b. ensuring tenants know their rights.
2. Many communities host an IRS program called VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance), which provides free tax preparation for people who make less than \$60,000. It would be great if a similar program could be developed with volunteer experts who help advise families in housing matters.
3. Provide information about how to obtain below-market rentals through many forums and in different languages, ensuring nonprofits who support low-income families are educated and have information for those they serve.
4. The federal anti-poverty *community action agencies* are very valuable to families, but it's incredibly difficult to qualify for assistance. We suggest that families that don't qualify but earn only (for instance) 10% above the threshold are funneled into another program that helps connect them to similar resources.
5. We encourage state government to ensure that communities have low-income rentals available by incentivizing it or passing a law setting minimum levels.
6. Incentivize community collaboratives like the Here2Help program in Stamford, a collective impact program supporting school-aged children and their families.
7. Create and incentivize the use of a universal application for housing and other needs would mean families don't have to fill out multiple applications to apply for multiple services.
8. Provide professional development for school staff around understanding the impact of housing instability, homelessness, and poverty on student life and the ways it creates challenges for young people.

9. Educate families, community providers, and school personnel on the rights and responsibilities of the McKinney-Vento Act.
10. When providing temporary accommodations to families, require that the housing be safe, clean, and accessible to transportation so students can continue to attend school.
11. Review zoning reforms through the lens of low-income families with school-aged children, perhaps utilizing community organizations to help state officials hear their concerns directly.
12. What tools can the state use to both hold communities accountable for zoning that doesn't punish low-income families and encourage or incentivize zoning or other reforms that provide safe, affordable housing solutions to low-income families?
13. The Alliance for Living in New London was used as an example of what works, with its "*let's get you housed*" mindset.
14. A nonprofit located in Waltham, MA, called More Than Words provides free housing for homeless young people in their social enterprise program. We ask state officials to help access federal funds to bring this opportunity to Connecticut.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to submit this testimony. We are happy to clarify any points in this letter and/or expand on anything within this document.

Our communities are only as strong as those with the least resources. The pandemic has exacerbated the housing and poverty plight amongst those who have been living on the edge of crisis for years, pushing them over the edge; greedflation has added yet another layer of struggle. Without the dignity of stable housing, our communities are diminished.

Thank you also for your attention and focus on the 119,000 young people across our state who are disconnected or are at risk of being disconnected. We believe that with increased funding and strategic, effective services and programs, every young person across the state can be connected and successful.

Sincerely,



Michael Duggan
Executive Director, Domus, Stamford, CT