



**Hartford Foundation for Public Giving testimony in support of
House Bill 5458, An Act Concerning Homelessness
Human Services Committee
March 14, 2024**

Good morning, Senator Lesser, Representative Gilchrest, Senator Seminara, Representative Case, and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee. **The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 5458, An Act Concerning Homelessness.**

The challenge of rising homelessness in Connecticut requires a coordinated and systemic response that addresses the multiple challenges people are often also managing as they look to secure stable housing. The Foundation recognizes the need to ensure that people who are homeless need to be able to readily access mental health, addiction services, and other social services.

House Bill 5458 would further promote coordinated access to services by directing the commissioners of the Department of Social Services, Department of Housing, and Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to work together on developing a strategic plan to improve outcomes for participants in the Connecticut Housing Engagement and Support Services (CHESS) program and to reduce housing instability across Connecticut. We understand the agencies are already working together and with other agencies, in tackling homelessness. We applaud this additional collaboration.

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, the Foundation has distributed \$104.5 million in grants to promote equitable opportunities for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families, and organizations, the Foundation has awarded grants of more than \$998 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our strategic commitment work with community partners to dismantle structural racism and advance equitable social and economic mobility for Black and Latine residents of Greater Hartford, supports basic human needs in our region, applying an equity lens to the systems and programs that address emergency shelter and homelessness diversion, physical and mental health care, and healthy food choices, and the digital divide.

For many years, the Foundation has been committed to preventing and reducing homelessness in Greater Hartford by providing grants to organizations supporting people experiencing homelessness and addressing systemic barriers to quality, affordable housing.

Over the past several years, the Foundation has awarded approximately \$1 million each year to local nonprofit organizations that provide access to emergency shelter, housing subsidies, case management, eviction prevention and landlord negotiation, employment services, and other services to residents at-risk or experiencing homelessness. Today, our support includes smaller, annual emergency assistance grants made to neighborhood organizations providing essential food, clothing, financial assistance (i.e.



rent and utility expenses) and domestic violence aftercare. In 2021, the Foundation began to offer flexible, multi-year core support grants to help service providers plan for longer-term initiatives and hire staff with greater confidence.

The Foundation and many partners throughout the state recognize that when people have access to stable housing, their economic and health outcomes improve. **Given the need, the Hartford Foundation and other philanthropic organizations have supported this work for many years.**

Connecticut policymakers have done a great deal over the past few years to address unmet mental health needs for residents following the pandemic and well before as we have seen the rise in unmet mental health as well as addiction service needs exacerbated by the opioid crisis, which the CT Department of Public Health has [documented](#).

The mental health needs are significant as reported in [DataHaven's Greater Hartford Community Wellbeing 2023 Index](#): 12 percent of Connecticut adults reported that they felt down, depressed, or hopeless for more than half of the days during the past 2 weeks, but there were notable differences within the population, with 19 percent of young adults aged 18 to 34 reporting this (2.4 times more likely than all other age groups). Black and Latino adults were 1.6 and 2.3 times more likely, respectively, to report feeling down or depressed when compared to white adults, and adults earning less than \$15,000 per year were 7.4 times more likely to report this when compared to adults earning \$200,000 or more.

The Wellbeing Index also highlights the fact that substance abuse is a significant challenge as we have seen fatal overdoses rise in recent years, with 2021 being the most fatal year for overdoses in history. In Greater Hartford, the fatal overdose rate for Black residents spiked, then receded, and the rate for Latino residents eclipsed the rates of white and Black residents.

For many years, the Hartford Foundation has provided support to our region's community-based mental and physical health care providers, including those that provide treatment for substance abuse. **If we are to prevent and reduce homelessness, the state must lead the effort to provide adequate resources to support people with mental health challenges who might be in danger of becoming homeless and without stable housing.**

Feedback from our grantees and the most recent data available reflect a need to double-down on homelessness prevention and diversion. Homelessness is an issue that impacts people in a variety of circumstances, and while rising rents and other factors play a significant role, mental health and substance abuse issues can also be a factor. In order for the state to be more responsive, it needs to ensure that there is continuous cross-agency collaboration and communication to develop and implement comprehensive systems of support.

For this reason, the Foundation offers its support for House Bill 5458, An Act Concerning Homelessness. The Foundation applauds the legislation's systemic approach to planning, coordinating, and maximizing resources for people experiencing homelessness with complex mental health and addiction service needs. The Foundation recognizes the value of building consensus on key metrics related to health, housing, and economic stability of participants in the CHES program. By working



together, these agencies can work to streamline administrative procedures to more effectively and efficiently deliver services to program participants. The bill also correctly prioritizes the need to identify existing Medicaid waiver programs or state plan amendments to address social determinants of health and develop a timeline for applications.

The Foundation looks forward to continuing its work with policymakers, nonprofits, philanthropy, and residents to develop effective long-term policies that will ensure all Connecticut residents have access to safe, secure, and affordable housing. We look forward to sharing what we are learning with you.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.