

Written Testimony to The Connecticut Sentencing Commission

November 29, 2012

The Corporation for Supportive Housing respectfully submits the below testimony to the State of Connecticut Sentencing Commission in support of the Commission's recommendations to:

- re-name provisional pardons "Certificates of Rehabilitation" to better describe their purpose and legal effect;
- expedite the process for obtaining Certificates;
- provide greater guidance to licensing agencies and employers about the effect of the Certificates;
- provide liability protection to employers who hire employees with Certificates; and
- Allow Certificates to be issued to remove barriers to public housing.

These recommendations are tremendous first step in reducing the barriers to reentry for vulnerable men and women coming out of jail and prison. We applaud the Commission in its attempt to not only reduce barriers to reentry but also in its attempt to align Certificates of Rehabilitation with the guidance of the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development on reducing barriers to public housing for individuals with criminal records as described in Secretary Donovan's letter to Public Housing Authorities. Additionally, we urge the commission to go one step further and consider the recommendation of scaling up initiatives such as the Frequent Users Services Engagement program (FUSE) that specifically target individuals with criminal histories and multiple barriers to housing.

In CT, we have experienced first hand the negative impact that lack of access to safe, affordable housing can have not only on people trying to reentry but also on their families and the communities to which they are returning. At the same time, we have also been leaders in the field of piloting initiatives that facilitate access to housing as a solution for vulnerable populations, including individuals with criminal records who also experience homelessness. Our experience and research have proven that by reducing barriers to housing for individuals with criminal records, states can reduce recidivism, increase public safety and improve the lives of individuals and their families.

Through FUSE, CT has seen the impact that access to safe, affordable, permanent supportive housing can have on this vulnerable population. Not only on individuals but also on the communities to which people are returning.

John is about to turn 44 years old. As he explains, until three years ago he has been in and out of prison since he was 20 years old. Upon each release John was less and less able to access mainstream resources. Despite his motivation to "go straight," his criminal record made it impossible for him to secure employment or lease an apartment. John relied on street savvy hustles to support his children as much as possible, to sustain his ever-growing addiction, and just to survive.

Unfortunately, stories like John are all too common. People get caught in a cycle of housing, economic and health care crises and they just can't escape without real help. This cycle is damaging to the individual—and often the taxpayer winds up on the hook for costly emergency room, hospital or mental care services.

John's story illuminates the need for solutions such as Certificates of Rehabilitation and facilitated access to housing to help individuals in reentering the community. Supportive housing is affordable housing that's combined with supportive services that residents can use to get back on their feet. Services include everything from case management to job training to drug and alcohol treatment. A wealth of research demonstrates that supportive housing is not only a very effective housing solution for people with complex challenges, but is also more cost-effective than the alternatives (which sadly often include emergency rooms, mental hospitals or incarceration).

About four years ago John was last released from prison. He spent a year in residential drug treatment and sober living, started going to college, and yet still faced the prospects of trying to make it without access to formal employment or housing. He was relegated back to the homeless shelter and things were looking bleak. Just then John was contacted by a case manager who worked in Bridgeport. She told him that he was eligible for FUSE (Frequent Users Systems Engagement), a housing program that especially targeted people who have been caught in the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. About two and a half years ago John moved into his own apartment, with his name on the lease. He immediately started to benefit from the supportive services that were available, and even landed a job as a cable TV technician. John reconnected with and rebuilt his relationships with his son and daughter. "This program gave me a chance when I had never had a chance before. Housing gave me the foundation to build on. It gave me dignity and hope. I get encouragement to help keep making those good conscious healthy decisions to keep moving down the right road." John is quick to offer support to other people in his community. "Now I give back, and it feels so, so good."

John is a perfect example of the benefits of permanent supportive housing for people who are stuck in a hopeless cycles of homelessness, emergency services utilization, and often incarceration. Access to housing and particularly, supportive housing benefits us all, by reducing public sector costs while improving individual and community health and wellbeing. John feels good about being a productive member of society. Housing has paved the way for John to move from a life on the street, to introducing the Governor at a dinner celebration of the FUSE program. We need to support recommendations, like those of the Sentencing Commission, that help countless residents across Connecticut to live with stability, health and hope.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Gallagher
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