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ADVOCATES CALL FOR CONNECTICUT TO RECOGNIZE A RIGHT TO HOUSING FOR ALL RESIDENTS

Proposed Bill to Get a Hearing on March 4

(March 3, 2021, HARTFORD, CT)—Tomorrow, the Committee on Housing will hold a public hearing on S.B. 194—a landmark piece of legislation expressing the state’s commitment to progressively implement policies to respect, protect, and fulfill a right to affordable, decent, safe, and stable housing. A similar bill passed the Housing Committee last year but lapsed after the unexpected closing of the General Assembly due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At last count, at least 2,904 individuals were homeless in Connecticut, a number that has likely risen due to pandemic-related business shutdowns and job losses. Currently, 45,000 Connecticut renters are likely to face eviction in the next two months, and approximately 110,000 are behind on rent. The pandemic has also exacerbated pre-existing racial disparities in housing stability, with people of color more likely to be evicted and experience homelessness. Black women are particularly impacted, facing eviction at twice the rate of white men.

Anderson Curtis, an organizer with ACLU-Connecticut’s Smart Justice stated at a press conference last week, “63% of renters in Connecticut spend over half of their income on rent. That means that before they go out to buy food or clothing, they have already spent most of their income keeping a roof over their heads.”

In introducing S.B. 194, Senator Saud Anwar (D- South Windsor, East Windsor, East Hartford, Ellington) stated, “We have to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused pain for many, and even before it hit, thousands of people were barely surviving. People every day in our communities face housing insecurity and we must take steps to protect them.” To address this crisis and to acknowledge the human dignity owed to all Connecticut residents, S.B. 194 would establish a right to housing in the state.

The bill would require state agencies and municipalities to consider the impact on the right to housing when adopting or revising policies and regulations. Although the bill does not direct the state to take specific policy actions to achieve the right to housing, it declares the state’s intention to advance the right and requires consideration of the right to housing in governmental decision making. According to Sarah Fox, Director of Policy at the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, the bill is “a first strong step in building not only the political will but also the proper policy stances to eliminate homelessness.”

According to Rafie Podolsky from Connecticut Legal Services, “It is important for the legislature to enunciate clearly the fundamental nature of housing as a human right.” S.B. 194 defines a right to housing as a right to protection from housing loss, the right to safe housing that meets all basic needs, the right to housing affordability, the right to rehousing assistance for people who have become homeless, and the right to recognition of special circumstances giving rise to increased incidence of homelessness and housing insecurity. “The kinds of housing stabilization addressed in this bill have all kinds of positive

consequences, not only for individuals and families, but also for communities and the state as a whole,” says Podolsky.

“We have an opportunity to make Connecticut the first state in our nation to recognize housing as a human right,” said Fox. “Such a commitment would provide added impetus for housing initiatives such as counsel to those facing eviction and foreclosure, funding homelessness response systems, lessening the impact of criminal and eviction history on housing access, and ending exclusionary zoning.”

To guide the state’s implementation of a right to housing, the bill would also create a right to housing committee to review the state’s overall approach and also to identify the needs of populations at greater risk of homelessness, housing insecurity, and their associated impacts. Protected groups named specifically in the legislation include individuals currently experiencing homelessness; individuals with disabilities; individuals with past or current involvement in the criminal justice system; individuals from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups; individuals from historically marginalized groups based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; survivors of sexual violence, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking and sexual trafficking; refugees and immigrants; and veterans.

The bill further stipulates that the committee will be composed of experts in housing policies and programs along with individuals with lived experience at the intersection of these experiences and identities with housing insecurity and homelessness. The bill would also designate an employee of the Department of Housing as the Housing Advocate, responsible for collecting data on and responding to issues raised by DOH benefits recipients in regard to the right to housing.

Tiernan Cabot of Hartford Bags of Love pointed out, “This bill would allow us to examine the root causes that factor into homelessness.”

In support of state action, Eric Tars, legal director of the National Homelessness Law Center cited the lack of federal investment in housing initiatives despite the success of previous programs, “From the time of FDR’s Second Bill of Rights—including the Right to Decent Housing—New Deal housing programs kept many people stably housed, until cuts to the HUD budget in the 1980s decimated affordable housing, which was never made up at the state level.”

Matt Morgan, Executive Director of Journey Home highlighted the successes of state action in the absence of federal support, “Before the first federal welfare program was created, states led the way. In the wake of federal disinvestment from housing, the states need to lead the way again, and Connecticut has a chance to do exactly that with S.B. 194.”

Says Anwar, “The ways individuals become homeless are predictable, which means they are also preventable. Each path – loss of work, mental illness, substance abuse as three examples – has opportunities for intervention, identification and, in effect, prevention. We need to better address those challenges with resources already available to us. Every step we take will protect real people and real families from real hardship.”

S.B. 194 is scheduled for a public hearing in the Housing Committee on March 4.

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About the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness

CCEH represents more than 100 members – emergency shelter providers, transitional housing providers, community and business leaders, and strategic partners – who share the goal of ending homelessness in Connecticut. In partnership with communities throughout the state, CCEH advances this goal through leadership, community organizing, advocacy, research, and education.

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