

**TESTIMONY OF THE NEW YORK STATE
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

**REGARDING THE 2009-2010 BUDGET OF THE
OFFICE OF TEMPORARY AND DISABILITY
ASSISTANCE**

**PRESENTED ON BEHALF OF
THE COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES DIRECTORS
BY
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Introduction

Good morning. My name is Deborah Damm O'Brien and I serve as Executive Director of Catholic Charities Housing Office in the Diocese of Albany and Chairperson of the New York State Council of Catholic Charities Directors Housing Committee. The New York State Catholic Conference represents the Bishops of the eight dioceses of New York State in matters of public policy. In the human service arena, the expertise, experience and advice of the Council of Catholic Charities Directors guides the Conference. The Catholic Church is the largest non-profit provider of education, health care and human services in the state.

I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Wright and other members of the Assembly Social Services Committee for conducting this public hearing. The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance is a state agency with which we at Catholic Charities work closely and we appreciate the work that they do and the partnership we have with them in serving the poor and vulnerable in our State.

Catholic Charities is committed to reducing poverty now and for the future. The provision of safe and affordable housing is an important part of any such effort. Often support services are necessary to enable an individual to make the transition from homelessness to a stable housing situation possible. We recognize that the fiscal situation in our State and country is serious and that cuts in the budget are being made in light of these challenging facts. However, those served by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance are living at the margins, and funding cuts here will have a dramatic impact on the lives of some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

One of the many services that the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance funds for needy New York State residents is supportive housing. I will attempt to illustrate how the proposed budget cuts will impact this portion of population served by this state agency.

The Single Room Occupancy Support Services Program funds case managers as well as other positions that enable a formerly homeless individual to have a home that provides security, meals and a safe, nurturing community with opportunities for employment and educational activities. The support services provided through this program have enabled SRO residents throughout the State to stabilize their lives and begin to address substance abuse, mental health and other issues that led to their homelessness. Without these supports, it is likely that many SRO residents could return to homelessness and, once again, become a burden on the legal, healthcare and other community systems.

Let me illustrate this further by sharing some information about the Single Room Occupancy program in the Catholic Charities Housing Office here in Albany. This program uses SRO support services funding to fund site operations and management staff in our SROs and to fund a case manager for each SRO property. Each case manager currently carries a case load of at least 50 SRO residents. In spite of the large case loads,

these case managers are able to work with the tenants so that they can make incredible strides in their lives – stabilizing their housing and reducing their reliance on public assistance, hospital emergency rooms, and their involvement with law enforcement.

Here is a further picture of the people served in CCHO's SROs:

- The people served in CCHO's 163 units of SRO housing span all ages of adults from 19 to 86 years of age. Our residents have a median age of 49 but almost 20% of our population is made up of individuals over the age of 60.
- The majority of SRO tenants have histories of multiple failures at independent living. Most have histories of substance abuse (70+%) and/or mental health treatment (60+%). 90% of the women have histories of Domestic Violence and need an environment in which to feel safe and secure while they rebuild their lives.
- Because of their histories, many SRO tenants have been significant users of hospital emergency rooms, other forms of emergency medical care, and have histories of involvement with law enforcement.
- 80+% are on public assistance and unemployed, 50+% have less than a High School diploma.
- 88% have histories of homelessness and 10% meet the HUD definition of "Chronically Homeless". The number is growing.
- 86% of our current tenants have incomes at or below the federal low-income standard. It is anticipated that the number of people in this category will rise as CCHO continues to give priority to applicants who are homeless rather than simply low income. The income range is from \$0 to \$22,992 with an average income of \$6,910 and a median income of \$4,200.

In spite of all these challenges, when these individuals get into stable housing at the single room occupancy residences at CCHO and work with their case managers:

Within the First 6 Months of their tenancy

- 100% complete a Homeless Prevention Plan (a self directed assessment and acknowledgement of behaviors/conditions that led to homelessness, and steps to take to avoid in future).
- 80% are removed from public assistance roles; approximately two-thirds find employment.
- 98.8% maintain stable housing and do not return to homelessness.

Within the First Year of their tenancy

- 92% are removed from public assistance roles
- 93% of these formerly homeless individuals are still housed and stabled.

Those are some of the numbers, now let me tell you about some of the people. I will share with you the story of three people whose lives have been positively impacted by supportive services provided in SRO housing.

“Kevin” was a commercial pilot for a freight company who began having marital problems. When his wife finally left him, Kevin began drinking heavily...losing his job, his pilot’s license, his home and family. After seven years of “streets”, Kevin finally came to live at a CCHO SRO Residence where he began to “recover”. Within 6 months, Kevin had worked with his Case Manager and had stopped drinking and joined AA to help maintain his sobriety. A few months later, Kevin was offered employment as a per diem Resident Assistant in the SRO in which he lived. The responsibilities of work gave Kevin a chance to feel good about himself again, and he soon became the most popular and dependable RA in the building. After two more years, Kevin had achieved his 3 goals: gainful employment, moving to new apartment and wrote and published a book about his love for flying. Upon his book being published, Kevin said; “CCHO gave me a home...and gave me my life back...Thank you guys for everything...”. CCHO could not have done this without SRO Support Services funding...

“Betty” is an 86 yr. old woman who has resided with CCHO in our SRO since 1992. Then a mere 69 yrs. old, Betty had lost her husband, and having no formal education and too elderly to work, Betty needed a safe, affordable place to live. Soon after her arrival, it was apparent that Betty had cognitive limitations that would likely prohibit her from being able to manage her affairs. For the past 17 yrs., Betty has lived at our SRO which is the highest level of independence she could achieve...and she is a kitchen aid in the food program...”earning” her keep by being part of the solution...and she is still healthy, happy and full of life...17 yrs. Ago...Betty found a home. This couldn’t have been possible without the great support staff at her SRO...paid for by SRO Support Services.

“James” was a professional trombonist who had played with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Artie Shaw and Mahalia Jackson...but his career was cut short by drug addiction, diabetes and “hard living” (James’ words)...After being homeless for several years...James found his way to CCHO’s SRO. With the help of the Case Manager...James’ deteriorated health was immediately addressed (James’ lost ½ of a foot and 3 fingers between two hands) and his diabetes was stabilized. James’ agreed to a referral to an out-patient clinic for drug addiction treatment and joined NA. Within one year...James had maintained his health and sobriety...and began to play his “horn” again at local churches and jam sessions. 18 months later, James’ died suddenly from a brain aneurism. We at CCHO know he died living in a place he called “home”, surrounded by many friends as evidenced by the nearly one hundred locals who came to his wake. His last years were made possible by SRO Support Services funding.
Catholic Charities Housing Office, Albany NY

Clearly, the strides made by these individuals would not be possible without the supportive services provided in the SRO housing. The SRO Support Services program is an integral part of the funding of these services. The significant, more than 10 per cent, cut in the program made by the recently enacted budget deficit reduction plan put these

very effective housing programs and support services in jeopardy. Not only do they put these programs in jeopardy for the individuals served, but they put the savings in emergency shelters systems, public assistance programs, and medical and legal care costs realized because of the effectiveness of these programs in jeopardy.

Conclusion

Being able to have a place we can call home is what we all cherish. Whether we are living in a room or an apartment or a house, the stability and security of home is one of the things that helps to give us the ability to meet each day with energy and commitment. These programs not only provide our brothers and sisters with housing, they provide men and women throughout the state with the opportunity to have a home and the stability that having a home brings. The support services they received in SRO housing that are funded by the SRO Support Services program give formerly homeless and very low income people an opportunity to live healthier lives.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. We would be happy to discuss further our concerns and the work that Catholic Charities' housing and related programs do throughout the state.