



## **Hartford Foundation for Public Giving testimony**

**House Bill 5208, An Act Concerning Housing Opportunities for Justice-Impacted Persons**

**House Bill 5209, An Act Concerning Housing Authority Jurisdiction**

**Senate Bill 168, An Act Establishing a Right to Housing**

**Senate Bill 170, An Act Requiring Housing Authorities to Provide Voter Registration Applications to Prospective Tenants**

**Housing Committee**

**March 1, 2022**

Good evening, Senator Lopes, Representative Williams, Senator Cicarella, Representative Polletta and distinguished members of the Housing Committee. **The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bills 5208 and 5209 and Senate Bills 168 and 170.**

**The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region.** As a community foundation, we manage approximately \$1 billion in assets. Over the past two years, the Foundation has distributed a record-breaking \$97 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity 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 \$894 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and improve social and economic mobility for Black and Latinx residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation seeks to **increase the number of Hartford residents living in higher opportunity neighborhoods.** Higher opportunity neighborhoods are defined by a variety of factors, including low unemployment, better performing schools, lower crime and greater availability of quality, affordable housing stock.

The Hartford Foundation seeks to increase the number of Hartford residents living in higher opportunity neighborhoods both by increasing the opportunities in Hartford neighborhoods and by increasing the ability of Hartford residents to choose to move to other higher opportunity areas throughout the Greater Hartford region. In order to support these outcomes, the Foundation invests in efforts designed to increase the stability, availability, and quality of affordable housing in the Greater Hartford region; align and leverage additional investment in Hartford neighborhoods; and increase social strength and connectedness of Hartford neighborhoods. COVID has reinforced the need for all of us to live in safe, stable homes, in safe, stable neighborhoods, in safe, stable communities.

Significant portions of our past and current investments have focused on preventing and reducing homelessness in Greater Hartford. On an annual basis, the Foundation awards approximately \$1 million to local nonprofit organizations to provide access to emergency shelter, housing subsidies, case management, eviction prevention and landlord negotiation, employment services, and other housing



services to residents at-risk or experiencing homelessness. This includes support to the Greater Hartford Coordinated Access Network for rapid re-housing services during the winter.

Public commitment must address the interplay of basic human needs, including access to food, mental and physical health care services, housing and other needs, and provide adequate support to the nonprofit organizations providing these services.

The Foundation supports **House Bill 5209, An Act Concerning Housing Authority Jurisdiction** to allow a housing authority to expand its jurisdiction to include neighboring municipalities in order to provide the residents with access to housing options in high and very high opportunity communities. Our strategic priorities explicitly support increased housing choice and mobility for residents to provide better access to higher paying jobs, diverse neighborhoods and quality schools. The Foundation has seen how the current system severely limits families' access to housing in higher opportunity neighborhoods.

In 2019 the Hartford Foundation provided a grant to support residents in Clay Arsenal Apartments, Barber Gardens, and Infill in Hartford, who wanted to move to areas of opportunity but were not given that choice. All three complexes had their contracts with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development terminated due to conditions that threatened residents' health and safety. The Foundation awarded grants to the Center for Leadership and Justice and Open Communities Alliance who worked with tenants to provide leadership training, legal assistance, and technical advice to navigate the complex housing situation and relocation process. Of the 150 Clay Arsenal families who were relocated, 61 percent wanted to move to Hartford suburbs such as West Hartford, Glastonbury, and Windsor. However, the timing of the relocation process and lack of affordable housing options in communities outside of Hartford meant that most families relocated to housing in the same, or similar, neighborhoods. These bills represent a positive step forward in the effort to increase the economic, ethnic and racial diversity of our communities.

The Foundation **offers its support for Senate Bill 168, An Act Establishing a Right to Housing**, which would establish a right to housing for all residents of the state and a Right to Housing Committee that includes a broad range of individuals representing groups that often lack access to housing. We credit the Housing Committee for including an expansive list of policy prescriptions and recommendations, particularly those focused on disproportionately impacted groups including people of color, returning citizens, and LGBTQ adults and youth. This bill includes expanded state investments in affordable housing, legal aid and financial assistance. The Foundation also supports the bill's provision to create a Right to Housing Committee whose membership includes a wide range of representation from those most impacted by a lack of access to housing. One step toward building equity is to include individuals with lived experience in the process of creating and reviewing policies that affect them.

For many years, the Foundation has funded critical reentry supports to help returning citizens succeed, including job training and placement assistance. Since 2018, the Foundation has supported the Reentry Welcome Center in Hartford. Community Partners in Action is the lead agency for the Reentry Welcome Center, which provides men and women, once released from incarceration and others in the community with criminal records, with basic services and referrals to programs through a broad network of partners, including connections to housing.



The Foundation's [Year One](#) and [Year Two](#) evaluations of the Reentry Welcome Center revealed, among other findings, the important collaboration between center and CT Department of Correction staff in pre-release planning, need for additional coordination across referral partners—and first and foremost to provide greater access to housing for returning citizens. Without stable housing, it is difficult to attend training programs or to hold a job. Research has shown that having stable housing reduces the risk of recidivism and enhances public safety. Housing options for returning citizens, however, can be limited as many men and women currently are rejected from private, public, and subsidized housing based on their criminal record. Our investments have shown the stigma of incarceration and discrimination returning citizens experience long after they have served their time undermines their ability to secure housing, education, and employment to successfully reenter the community. **For these reasons, the Foundation supports House Bill 5208, An Act Concerning Housing Opportunities for Justice-Impacted Persons.**

We support the bill's approach of placing reasonable limitations on landlord, property manager, and housing agency use of criminal background checks to screen rental applicants or tenants and preventing blanket denial of rental applicants with criminal records. We support requiring individual assessments to consider factors such as the nature of the crime, time passed since the conviction, age at the time of the offense, and evidence of rehabilitation, good behavior, or employment and tenant history. This balanced review could fairly open access to rental housing to people returning from incarceration needing stable housing. Respectfully, we leave to the Housing Committee, advocates including those with lived experience, and other experts to develop consensus on appropriate time periods and other provisions related to housing providers considering misdemeanor versus felony convictions.

Community voice and leadership is a priority for the Hartford Foundation, one that runs throughout each of our strategic priorities. Our commitment to civic engagement takes many forms, including support for efforts to increase voting, participation in local government, volunteering or sharing ideas on how resources could be used to make our community a better place. Resident engagement efforts seek to develop resident leadership and opportunities for collective action. The Foundation believes it is vital that policy decisions are informed by a diverse group of residents who are impacted by the actions at City Hall and the State Capitol.

In 2018, 2019, and 2020 the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving supported nonpartisan voter registration initiatives for Greater Hartford. The objective of this work was to reach populations least likely to participate in federal, state and local elections: young adults, Latinx and Black residents and people living in high poverty neighborhoods. **The Foundation offers its support for Senate Bill 170, An Act Requiring Housing Authorities to Provide Voter Registration Applications to Prospective Tenants**, which will provide an additional opportunity to encourage qualified residents to vote and engage in the democratic process.

The Foundation looks forward to continuing its work with policymakers, nonprofits and residents to develop effective long-term policies to ensure that all Connecticut residents have access to quality, affordable housing in higher opportunity neighborhoods and have their voices heard by policymakers.

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