PARTNERSHIP FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

Partnership for Strong Communities promotes equitable change in Connecticut housing policy by coordinating advocacy, advancing research, and uniting diverse partners

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS
CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE
CHELSEA ROSS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
PARTNERSHIP FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2025

H.B. 5032 – AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2027

Senator Osten, Representative Walter, Senator Hartley, Senator Kushner, Representative Exum, Representative Paris, Senator Somers, Representative Nuccio, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on **H.B. 5032,** *"An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2027."* I serve as the Executive Director of the Partnership for Strong Communities. We are a statewide nonprofit research, policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring everyone in Connecticut has a safe, stable home that is affordable to them in an equitable community of their choice.

We respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee support:

- **The Governor's proposed $10 million baseline adjustment of the Department of Housing- Housing/Homeless Services line item to maintain existing Rental Assistance Program (RAP) vouchers in the face of rising rents.**
- **An additional $50 million increase annually to expand RAP by 3,400 new vouchers.**

Together, we request the Appropriations Committee support a $60 million investment in Rental Assistance to support low-income and vulnerable Connecticut residents.

Understanding RAP Today

The Rental Assistance Program (RAP) currently serves approximately 6,500 households and is one of Connecticut's most immediate and effective tools for addressing housing instability. Like the federal Housing Choice Voucher Program (commonly known as Section 8), RAP helps low-income households afford safe, stable housing by covering a portion of rent and allowing families to choose housing in communities with access to schools, jobs, and support networks. About 20% of active vouchers are used by income-eligible households (those making less than 50% AMI), while **80% are set aside for targeted programs or vulnerable populations including people**

experiencing homelessness, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with high interaction with other state systems.

The Governor's $10 Million Adjustment: Keeping the Program Whole

Since 2020, statewide rents have increased 29%. The average monthly RAP cost has risen from $830 in 2020 to $1,070 in 2024. These rental increases have impacted the Department of Housing's programmatic costs of operating the Rental Assistance Program. Recognizing this, the Governor has proposed a $10M budget adjustment which simply maintains the existing levels of service for the current 6,500 families served by the program. Without this investment, the state may be forced to take vouchers out of circulation to cover rising housing costs and serve fewer households. **This $10M is necessary to keep this program whole, but does not serve additional households.**

2025 Appropriations in New Targeted Vouchers: $6.7M

Recognizing the acute need for additional supportive housing services, in 2025 the General Assembly appropriated $6.7M, beginning in FY27, to create new housing vouchers for targeted populations. This appropriation is expected to serve 212 HeadStart families with young children, 77 adults with developmental disabilities through DDS, and 250 elderly and disabled households. Like the proposed $10M adjustment, this $6.7M is necessary to expand service to vulnerable populations most at risk of homelessness and high housing cost burdens and is already codified in the FY26-FY27 biennial budget.

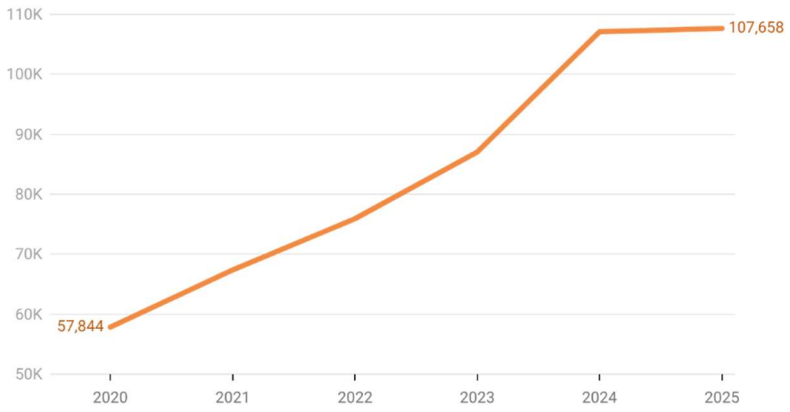
The Missing Piece: $50M for RAP Expansion

The current housing affordability crisis requires a commensurate investment to significantly expand the state's RAP program. **A $50M investment would create approximately 3,400 new vouchers, increasing program capacity by 50%.** The application waitlist for the RAP program was last opened in 2014, over a decade ago. Over 86,000 applications were submitted in only two weeks, and of those, 3,000 households were selected by lottery to be placed on the state's waiting list. Eligible households had about a 1 in 10 chance of being connected to a voucher. The number of active vouchers has remained static, around 6,500. Over **177,000 eligible low-income households receive no housing support from either the state or federal government, and Connecticut's homeless population increased for its fourth consecutive year.**

Connecticut's Housing Crisis is Outpacing the State's Response

One in every three calls to 211 (35%) are made for housing and shelter requests – the largest category of call volume by a wide margin.[1] Of those calls, 37% were looking for low-cost housing and 18% were looking for rental assistance. **In 2025 alone, there were 107,658 calls looking for rental assistance**, **an 86% increase since 2020 levels**. These calls are not focused in a single geographic area; calls for housing assistance were made from all but four of Connecticut's 169 towns, or 98% of the state.

Number of Calls to 211 for Rental Assistance



Source: 211 Counts • Created with Datawrapper

The Governor has recently allocated $2.6M to 211 to hire more call operators, an important investment to ensure waiting times for callers are low and to prevent burnout and high turnover among the staff. However, an investment in 211 operations without a commensurate investment in housing resources only means that we can more efficiently tell people we have nothing to offer them. During a recent interview with United Way, 211 staff shared the unique challenge of responding to housing calls in such a constrained system:

> *"I think this [housing calls] is the toughest call that we handle, and I say this all the time,* ***the housing calls are the toughest calls because there is not an immediate solution,*** *shelters are typically full… a call to us today does not mean that you will be in shelter."*
>
> *"The housing crisis staff is different and that's because there's not an immediate place to put people, and that can wear on you."*

[1] The next most requested category of assistance, food support, makes up only 15% of all calls, less than half of the calls for housing assistance.

In our state more than 120,000 households that rent their home are severely cost-burdened, spending over half of their income on rent. The 2025 Point-in-Time Count reported a 10% increase in homelessness, with 3,735 individuals experiencing homelessness. These numbers have risen steadily since the COVID-19 pandemic, continuously signaling the urgent need for intervention. Additionally, the housing crisis is not felt equally in our state. Black and Latino renters are disproportionately impacted, with 31% of all Black and Latino renters experiencing severe housing cost burdens compared to 19% of white renters[2].

RAP: A Proven and Cost-Effective Solution

Housing vouchers are one of the most evidence-backed anti-poverty tools available. Vouchers have a proven track record of reducing homelessness, increasing family stability, and improving long-term outcomes**.** RAP ensures that individuals and families do not have to make impossible choices between paying rent and covering other basic needs like food, medical care, and transportation. Research demonstrates that housing vouchers improve health and educational outcomes while reducing homelessness, poverty, and racial disparities:

- RAP serves highly vulnerable populations at high risk for homelessness like veterans, families with child welfare involvement, people involved in the justice system, those with high Medicaid utilization, those leaving nursing homes, and those with disabilities.
- One study comparing long-term voucher subsidies with other forms of housing intervention found vouchers lead to the best outcomes for reducing family homelessness and increasing housing stability.[3]
- Households with housing vouchers spend their extra income on necessities; research shows that families who spend less than 30% of their income on rent spend significantly more on food and health care than those who are rental cost burdened (spending more than 30% of income on rent)[4]
- Housing vouchers are associated with a reduction in psychological distress, domestic violence, substance use, and food insecurity. HUD has also found that vouchers reduce

[2] National Equity Atlas, 2020. https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Housing_burden

[3] Fischer, Will et. al., Research Shows Rental Assistance Reduces Hardship and Provides Platform to Expand Opportunity for Low-Income Families, December 5, 2019, https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/research-shows-rental-assistance-reduces-hardship-and-provides-platform-to-expand.

[4] Family Options Study: 3-Year Impacts of Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, October 2016, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/FamilyOptionsStudySummaryReport.pdf.

familial separation, frequent school changes, school or childcare absences, and behavioral concerns in children.[5]

RAP is not just housing policy. It is economic policy. From a fiscal perspective, rental assistance reduces reliance on emergency shelters, hospital systems, and crisis services. **Delaying investment does not save the state money, instead it shifts costs to more expensive systems downstream.**

Expanding rental assistance has been shown to significantly improve economic mobility, health outcomes, and educational stability as well as reduce poverty. Rental assistance strengthens our economy by reducing workforce instability and ensuring that families are not displaced due to rising rents. Employers rely on workers having stable housing, and without it, economic growth is threatened. Failing to adequately fund RAP actually increases the financial burden on the state, leading to higher costs in emergency shelters, healthcare, and other social services. **Inadequate investments in housing affordability result in greater long-term expenses for Connecticut taxpayers.**

Expand the Rental Assistance Program Now

The number of households facing housing instability and severe cost burdens is increasing while our best policy program remains unavailable to most eligible households. The Governor's $10M adjustment to RAP is necessary to protect the program from funding shortfalls that would force a reduction in the number of families served. We urge the committee to invest an additional $50M to expand RAP **to provide immediate stability for Connecticut families facing a housing crisis now.** We ask you to invest in stability, dignity, and opportunity for your residents by investing in RAP this budget cycle. Thank you for your time and your commitment to addressing our state's housing needs and thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Chelsea Ross
Executive Director
Partnership for Strong Communities

[5] Mazzara, Alicia, Expanding Housing Vouchers Would Cut Poverty and Reduce Racial Disparities, Center on Budget Policy Priorities, May 11, 2021, https://www.cbpp.org/blog/expanding-housing-vouchers-would-cut-poverty-and-reduce-racial-disparities.

Additional Reading:

- Rental Assistance Factsheets, Partnership for Strong Communities
  - Rental Assistance as the System Stabilizer
  - Comparing Federal and State Rental Vouchers
  - RAP Applicant Experience
  - RAP Applicant Experience FAQs
  - Households with State Rental Assistance by Town
  - Benefits of Housing Vouchers
- Expanding Rental Assistance in Connecticut, Dr. Samaila Adelaiye, Partnership for Strong Communities
- Best Practices: Effective Long-Term Tenant-Based Rental Assistance Programs, Dr. Samaila Adelaiye, Partnership for Strong Communities
- Literature Review: The Impacts of Long-Term Rental Assistance, Dr. Samaila Adelaiye, Partnership for Strong Communities
- Can Rental Assistance Programs Reduce Evictions Across Connecticut Towns?, Dr. Samaila Adelaiye, Partnership for Strong Communities
- State-Funded Rental Vouchers: Connecticut and Our Neighbors, Alysha Gardner, Partnership for Strong Communities
- State of Housing in Connecticut, Partnership for Strong Communities
- Rental Assistance Program Policy Brief, Kayleigh Pratt, Partnership for Strong Communities