

Housing Committee Public Hearing

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

H.B 5208 An Act Concerning Housing Opportunities For Justice-Impacted Persons

H.B 5233 An Act Concerning Evictions For Cause

Submitted by Brandi A. Kennedy, MSW Policy Practice Intern

March 1, 2022

The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent who often contact our Information and Referral (I & R) service with needs and support related to housing.

We urge the committee to support *H.B 5208 An Act Concerning Housing Opportunities For Justice-Impacted Persons*.

Criminal background checks are often used as a screening criteria for rental applications to determine qualified applicants; however, for many Connecticut women this is a barrier to obtaining adequate housing. Many formerly incarcerated individuals, who have paid their debts to society, continually face penalties that exclude them from the housing market fairly. This disparity disproportionately burdens formerly incarcerated women, especially women of color, who have served time for non-violent crimes and work hard to become self-sufficient.

As of January 2020, Connecticut estimated approximately 2,905 residents experiencing homelessness on any given day.¹ A significant factor of this rate are those reentering back into society after being discharged from prison as they are rejected from public, subsidized and private housing based solely on their criminal record. Their criminal records become the sole predictor of their tenancy eligibility, and assumes that these individuals are incapable of moving past their mistakes. We further criminalize these Connecticut residents by discriminating them from an essential and basic need. This discrimination violates the Fair Housing Act, perpetuates racial and ethnic disparities within our state and increases the risk of recidivism.

For women, the rate of homelessness after being incarcerated is even higher.² This leads to homelessness shelters becoming a revolving door as an attempt to survive and burdens Connecticut shelters that face capacity concerns daily. The Connecticut Coalition To End Homelessness recently matched data from 450,000 people who have been admitted to the Department of Justice (DOC), the states joint prison and jail system, and found that of the 17,266 people who used shelters in their network between 2016 and 2019 that approximately 8,187 were formerly incarcerated.³ This means that 1 in 5 people who used Connecticut homelessness shelters were released from prison and 35% of those individuals were Black, compared to just 10% of the general Connecticut population .⁴

The studies conducted by the Connecticut Coalition To End Homelessness depict an unjust and unsafe system that jeopardizes public safety and perpetuates the pervasive criminalization of homelessness within our communities. Furthermore, perpetuates racism and discrimination among women, especially women of color from advancing beyond their criminal records for nonviolent crimes and contributing to stabilizing Connecticut's economy.

CWEALF urges the committee to pass H.B. 5208 in order to prohibit housing providers from considering prospective tenant's criminal convictions after significant time periods have passed. Section 2 of the bill states that a housing provider shall consider the nature and severity of the crime, the relationship, if any, the crime may have to the prospective tenancy of the convicted person, the information pertaining to the degree of rehabilitation of the convicted person and the time elapsed since the conviction. Moreover, the bill provides protections for formerly incarcerated applicants as prior to denial of the rental application, a housing provider must provide written notice to the applicant that the application is under further review and must back their denial through a thorough process that examines beyond the criminal record and examines the applicant's good character, conduct and rehabilitation.

Access to safe and affordable housing is a basic human right for all Connecticut residents. We urge you to consider H.B 5208 as an opportunity to address a discriminating system that will allow formerly incarcerated residents the right to thrive, the right to avoid recidivism and safely live in our communities.

Second, CWEALF supports H.B. 5233: *An Act Concerning Evictions For Cause* that requires housing providers to have a substantiated cause for evictions. Recently, the Aurora Women and Girls Foundation, CT Data Collaborative and the Connecticut Fair Housing Center analyzed five years of eviction court filings to better understand the eviction crisis occurring in Connecticut. The analysis found that Connecticut residents, more specifically residents of color, have endured decades of discriminatory housing actions and policies.

From 2017 to 2021, Black renters were over three times more likely than white renters to have an eviction case filed against them, and Hispanic/Latino renters were over two times more likely than white renters.⁵ Additionally, 56% of eviction cases filed in the state are filed against women renters compared to only 44% of male renters.⁶ Eviction filings against women speaks to ongoing systemic issues involving pay gaps, quality job discrimination

and women's growing debt. This bill is imperative to women, especially women of color, who face intersecting discriminatory practices on a daily basis and serves as a stepping stone for Connecticut to begin to address one of many barriers inhibiting women in our communities from self-sufficiency.

1 <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/co1/>

2 <https://interrogatingjustice.org/challenges-after-release/homelessness-after-reentry-leads-to-higher-recidivism-rates/>

3 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/02/10/homelessness/>

4 see note 3

5 <https://www.ctdata.org/evictions-report>

6 see note 5