



JON PLUMER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 42nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Senate Bill 144

Grants to defray housing costs and for diversion programming

Chairman LeMahieu and members,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to come before you today to discuss Senate Bill 144, aimed at helping to prevent homelessness from occurring and provide swift assistance for those who may be on the verge of experiencing homelessness.

This bipartisan bill builds off recommendations made by Wisconsin's recently formed Interagency Council on Homelessness in its report issued late last year. The approach of this bill is twofold, focusing both on increasing resources to prevent families from experiencing homelessness and by utilizing a new, state diversion program.

Known as "temporary income shock," things like a medical emergency, loss of a job or other catastrophic event are often the leading factor in failure to pay rent. We also know that it is cheaper to keep an individual or a family in their homes as opposed to providing housing for them in shelter around the state.

For that reason, Wisconsin has an already-existing program known as the Homeless Prevention Program (HPP). The HPP makes grants and loans to low or moderate-income families to defray living costs – helping to overcome a temporary income shock. With measurable successes of this program, especially in the Milwaukee area, this bill would increase support to our state's HPP by \$500,000 a year through appropriations determined by the joint committee on finance.

The legislation would also provide resources to begin a statewide diversion program. Under diversion, the state will provide short-term assistance to help steer those who are experiencing homelessness into stable housing. Services that are to be included under this umbrella may include things like: assistance searching for housing, providing a rental subsidy or utility assistance, case management or other legal services to assist with housing.

SB 144 would direct an increase of \$300,000 a year to be utilized for diversion programs across the state. Furthermore, it specifies that results of participant progress be reported and tracked in the state's Homeless Management Information System so that we may learn and build upon the successes seen in the field.



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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 42nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Coupled with additional legislation discussed before this, and several other committees today, I fully believe that we are taking comprehensive steps forward to address homelessness in our state. I'm proud of the work being done here and know that it will have a positive impact on the communities I serve.

Again, thank you for your consideration of SB 144 and hearing my comments today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.



Luther S. Olsen

State Senator

14th District

TO: Senate Committee on Utilities and Housing
FROM: Senator Luther Olsen
DATE: Tuesday, August 13, 2019
SUBJECT: Testimony for Senate Bill 144/Assembly Bill 124

Thank you Chairman LeMahieu and members of the Senate Committee on Utilities and Housing for holding a hearing and allowing me to testify in support of Senate Bill 144 (SB 144) and Assembly Bill 124 (AB 124).

This bill was drafted as part of a package that was drawn from the recommendations included in *A Hand and Home: Foundations for Success*, the 2019-2022 state action plan from the Interagency Council on Homelessness. The idea for this legislation came directly from recommendation strategies 1.1 and 1.2.

Under strategy 1.1 it was suggested that we increase prevention funding. The Homeless Prevention Program at the Department of Administration is authorized to make grants or loans to people of low or moderate income that help defray housing costs. Temporary income shock such as the loss of a job or unforeseen medical expenses is one of the leading factors in failure to pay rent, it was a greater factor than the cost of rent itself. So being able to adjust for that temporary setback can lead to positive results. This program aims to help stabilize families in times of need, so that they are able to prevent homelessness that would be caused due to temporary setbacks. This prevention program pays landlords for the back-rent they need to help individuals avoid being evicted.

The second part of this legislation is from strategy 1.2, which focuses on diversion programming. In the recommendations it stated that, "Diversion has been called the cornerstone of an effective community response to homelessness." Senate Bill 144/Assembly Bill 124 will define diversion programming, this prevention program provides short-term assistance to those who are homeless that will help get them into immediate, safe, stable housing rather than placing them in a temporary shelter, and includes utilizing conflict resolution and mediation skills that will help them to reconnect with their support systems.

Again, thank you for holding a hearing today. I ask for your support on SB 144 and AB 124.



JIM STEINEKE

MAJORITY LEADER

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Testimony on Senate Bills 119, 120, 121 and 144 A Hand for the Homeless

Chairman LeMahieu and members,

I'd like to thank you for hearing these bills and discussing the issue of homelessness in Wisconsin and the crucial steps we've put forward to move towards ensuring everyone in Wisconsin having a place to call home.

Leading up to today's hearing, there has been a tremendous amount of time and study dedicated to this issue. Back in April of 2017, I joined Representatives Pronschinske, Rodriguez, and Snyder and Senator Darling in releasing a series of bills to address homelessness in a statewide, comprehensive way. It was the first major attention the issue had received at the state level in decades.

One of the bills introduced created a new statutory body, the Interagency Council on Homelessness. The Council contained secretaries or directors of eight state agencies, the four continuum of care organizations in Wisconsin, and a designee of the governor. The creation of the council was seen by advocates and stakeholders as a turning point for combatting homelessness in Wisconsin, as it would allow for coordination of the state's resources and goals.

After the Assembly passed the first set of bills, we set out to learn more about the issue of homelessness around the state. We held bipartisan tours of homeless facilities, warming shelters, food pantries, and more throughout the summer of 2017. These experiences reinforced what we as legislators already knew to be true: continuing the conversation beyond our initial bills was going to be crucial in addressing this state-wide issue.

In the fall of 2017, the bill creating the Interagency Council on Homelessness was signed into law. Exactly one year later, the Council, under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor Kleefisch, released its 2019-2022 action plan, "A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success," which was touted as the state's "most coordinated, deepest attempt to prevent and curtail homelessness." From the plan, I worked with my Republican colleagues in the Assembly and Senate to identify eight distinct legislative priorities, including new programming and \$3.75 million in new spending. Several of these priorities are what we are here to discuss with you today.

The bills before you today take aim at several different problems – starting with Senate Bill 144, which works to prevent families on the cusp of homelessness from ever reaching that critical point. By helping weather temporary hardships like job loss or emergency medical expenses, the Homeless Prevention Program works to help families meet their rent in these extreme examples and stay in their own home and out of crowded shelters. By investing in diversion programming, this bill helps keep families in their own homes and lessens the strain on services provided to the chronically homeless.

However, we know that prevention and diversion programming sometimes cannot meet all changes a family might face. That's why SB 119, authored by Senator Bernier and Representative Synder, focuses

on transitioning homeless individuals into independent living scenarios. The bill, which directs resources to the state's Housing Assistance Program, will provide assistance in finding permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing services and transitional housing options for homeless individuals.

Talking with service providers and those that have experienced homelessness, we also know that there are often many challenges that arise in finding permanent housing options for homeless individuals – especially those that may have histories that include evictions or convictions. To help alleviate these concerns, SB 120, authored by Representative Dittrich and Senator Bernier, would create a Housing Navigation Grant to work with landlords and those seeking housing to resolve disputes and provide a critical link to affordable housing options.

And finally, SB 121 authored by Senator Bernier and Representative Pronschinske focuses on increasing the availability of affordable housing options as a possible solution to preventing and alleviating homelessness. The bill would establish a forgivable loan program to help encourage renovations of existing properties, and would encourage that property owner to in turn rent that housing to individuals or families with low or moderate income.

As I think you'll see demonstrated in today's hearing, there is no one, silver bullet solution to addressing homelessness here in our state. There are a number of proactive steps we can take to help those families on the cusp of homelessness, those currently without a home of their own, and those who may have a roof of their own for the first time in weeks, months or maybe even years.

I appreciate the committee's time today and would be happy to entertain any question you might have.



A Hand for the Homeless

21,906

Individuals experiencing homelessness received services and shelter.

17,905

Individuals stayed in an emergency shelter.

56%

Of those staying in emergency shelters were outside of Milwaukee, Dane and Racine Counties

494

Minors received services as unaccompanied homeless youth.

Figures cover 2017 and are based on most-recent data submitted to the Homeless Management Information System, operated in Wisconsin by the Institute for Community Alliances.



Rep. Pat Snyder (Wausau) meets with constituents to discuss local homelessness services and ways to improve outcomes.

A Cohesive Approach to Combatting Homelessness in Wisconsin...

In April of 2017, the Wisconsin Legislature released a series of bills in tandem with 2017-19 state budget priorities to address homelessness in a statewide, comprehensive way, the first major attention the issue had received in decades.

One bill created a new statutory body, the Interagency Council on Homelessness. Formerly chaired by Lieutenant Governor Kleefisch, the council contained secretaries or directors of eight state agencies and the four Continuum of Care organizations in Wisconsin – federally mandated collaborative zones of housing and service providers and homelessness advocates.

One year to the day of its authorizing bill becoming law, the council released its 2019-2022 action plan, *A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success*, which was “perhaps the state’s most coordinated, deepest attempt to prevent and curtail homelessness.” The bills in this package were identified as legislative priorities in the plan. They include new programming and \$3.75 million in new spending, more than doubling the state’s current commitment.

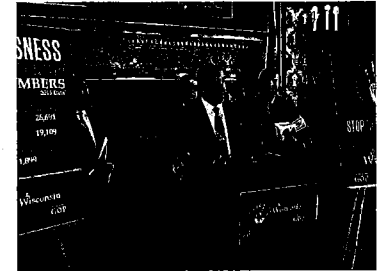
State Government’s Action on Homelessness

- September 9, 2016: *Homelessness identified in Assembly Republican’s Forward Agenda;*
- April 12, 2017: *Assembly Republican’s release legislation to address homelessness;*
- September 21, 2017: *Gov. Walker signs state budget into law — includes homelessness funding;*
- November 27, 2017: *Homelessness legislation signed into law by Walker, including creation of Interagency Council;*
- February 12, 2018: *Interagency Council holds inaugural meeting;*
- April 16, 2018: *Interagency Council hires first director;*
- November 27, 2018: *Interagency Council releases first action plan with a number of policy recommendations;*
- February 21, 2019: *Assembly Republicans introduce legislation based on Interagency Council’s policy recommendations, Gov. Evers appoints himself as the new chair of Council*

A Hand for the Homeless

Based on policy recommendations made in the report issued by the state's Interagency Council on Homelessness, the following eight bills include a mix of new programming and a total of \$3.75 million in spending. The legislation detailed below represents a multifaceted approach that has been called "the state's most coordinated, deepest attempt to prevent and curtail homelessness" by the Wisconsin State Journal and further demonstrates legislative Republican's further commitment to providing a hand for the homeless.

AB 119 / SB 122 Rep. Jim Steineke & Sen. Alberta Darling	Allocates \$500,000 annually to the State Shelter Subsidy Grant program, a 50% increase to the fund and its first major increase in 25 years. It also cleans up administrative code. Most significantly, it adds performance metrics to incentivize shelters to responsibly transition individuals into permanent housing.
AB 120 / SB 145 Rep. Jesse James & Sen. Luther Olsen	Directs \$500,000 annually (a 100% increase) to the Homeless Case Management Services Program to assist families in shelter with gaining employment or increasing their income.
AB 121 / SB 120 Rep. Barb Dittrich & Sen. Kathy Bernier	Creates a Housing Navigation Grant, funded at \$300,000 annually, to work with landlords to find available permanent housing units for individuals experiencing homelessness and to mediate any disputes that may arise.
AB 122 / SB 124 Rep. Jessie Rodriguez & Sen. Dan Feyen	Directs the Department of Workforce Development to identify and create programs for homeless youth (age 18-24) and adults, catered to those populations' specific needs. It also mandates collaboration between local Workforce Development Boards and their corresponding homeless response systems.
AB 123 / SB 119 Rep. Pat Snyder & Sen. Kathy Bernier	Increases assistance by \$900,000 annually (a 300% increase) to the Housing Assistance Program, the state's most flexible funder of Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Re-housing, and Transitional Housing.
AB 124 / SB 144 Rep. Jon Plumer & Sen. Luther Olsen	Allocates an additional \$500,000 annually to the Homeless Prevention Program to help avoid evictions, and creates a new program funded at \$300,000 to begin diversion. Diversion is short-term assistance to steer those who present as homeless into stable housing outside the traditional homelessness system.
AB 125 / SB 121 Rep. Treig Pronschinske & Sen. Kathy Bernier	Creates an innovative forgivable loan program, funded at \$500,000 annually, to renovate existing units for use as affordable housing.
AB 144 / SB 123 Rep. Tony Kurtz & Sen. Alberta Darling	Allots \$250,000 annually (a 100% increase) to the Skills Enhancement Program to help low-income individuals receive job training and technical skills.



STATE SENATOR KATHY BERNIER
TWENTY-THIRD SENATE DISTRICT



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From: Senator Kathy Bernier

To: Senate Committee on Utilities and Housing

Re: Testimony on Senate Bill 119
Relating to: housing grants to homeless individuals and families and making an appropriation

Testimony on Senate Bill 120
Relating to: housing navigator grants and making an appropriation

Testimony on Senate Bill 121
Relating to: housing quality standards loans, granting rule-making authority, and making an appropriation

Date: August 13, 2019

Thank you Chairman LeMahieu and committee members for allowing me to testify on Senate Bills 119, 120 and 121 today. These bills are part of a package of bills intended to combat the serious problem of homelessness in Wisconsin. The entire package is drawn directly from recommendations made by the 2019-2022 state action plan from the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Senate Bill 119 adds \$900,000 annually to the Housing Assistance Program. This is a 300% increase to a program which is the state's most flexible funder of Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Re-housing, and Transitional Housing. Together, these three programs facilitate the movement of homeless individuals into independent living and are a critical component to ending homelessness in Wisconsin.

Senate Bill 120 creates a Housing Navigation Grant, funded at \$300,000 annually, to work with landlords to find available permanent housing units for individuals experiencing homelessness and to mediate any disputes that may arise. Some homeless individuals may have a history of evictions or criminal convictions, which may hinder their ability to find permanent housing. The housing navigator can work with housing providers, as well as the tenants and their case managers to provide a link between individuals seeking affordable housing and available units.

Senate Bill 121 will create an innovative forgivable loan program to expand the availability of affordable housing stock in the state. All federally funded housing programs require eligible units to be "clean, safe and sanitary" in order to pass a Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection. In some cases, the financial barrier to renovating a unit to achieve HQS compliance may prevent someone from making that unit available for public housing assistance. This new program will create a small loan program for the purpose of helping owners of rental units around the state achieve HQS compliance, with the loan to be forgiven if the unit is rented as low-income housing for a certain period of time.

Homelessness touches thousands of people across all parts of Wisconsin. I ask you to please consider the passage of this package of bills as we work together to tackle this serious problem. Thank you again for allowing me to provide testimony today.

Written testimony of Michael Basford, Director of the State of Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness, for the Wisconsin State Senate Committee on Utilities and Housing meeting of August 13, 2019 regarding SB 119, AB 123, SB 120, AB 121, SB 121, AB 125, SB 144, and AB 124

Chairman LeMahieu and committee members,

Thank you very much for this opportunity to comment on legislation before you today on funding programs to fight homelessness in Wisconsin.

In the most recent compilation of data by the Institute for Community Alliances for the State of Wisconsin, 21,906 people were reported to have experienced homelessness in Wisconsin in 2017. In the "Hand and a Home" action plan produced by the previous administration last year, a recommendation was made for \$3.75 million in new state annual spending to fight homelessness. Governor Evers accepted these recommendations and included them in the 2019-20 budget submitted to the Legislature earlier this year.

Securing this funding as soon as practicable is important to provide these critical services to those who may become, or are already, homeless. I encourage you to support these bills, with some suggested necessary changes included in this testimony, and bring them to a vote in the Senate and the Assembly as soon as possible. Due to the removal of the recommendations from the budget process this money is unnecessarily held up when there was bipartisan work and consensus reached during formulation of this plan. The vulnerable population these programs seek to assist don't have the luxury of waiting while those responsible for scheduling floor sessions delay consideration of this legislation until this winter or next spring.

There are concerns the Department of Administration has with SB 121/AB 125 – the Housing Quality Standards loan bills. While in agreement that providing funds to increase the availability of quality housing stock for low-income people is critical, this bill as proposed has flaws.

- 1) In AB 125, loans would be considered for forgiving if the landlord who receives them "rents housing units to persons or families of low or moderate income". While that is welcome, it doesn't preclude landlords who rent market-rate units to higher-income persons or families from getting a loan from this fund to repair market-rate units.
- 2) The standards for loan forgiveness and disbursement of loans (and collection of payments from landlords whose loans are not forgiven) will require staff to administrate and this bill doesn't include staff resources.
- 3) While the goal of increasing the number of affordable units that are of acceptable housing quality is a good goal, this bill doesn't do enough to address some of the more pressing issues when it comes to renting units to people who in turn damage the units. This loan provides funds on the front-end, it doesn't take care of landlords who suffer damage after renting to people who damage their units.

DOA recommends the following to improve these bills:

- 1) Instead of a revolving loan fund, make this a grant program. If loans would already be considered for forgiveness in the event the landlord rents to moderate- and low-income people, just having them be grants would make the application and administration processes easier.
- 2) Make a requirement that all grant recipients rent properties served by grants only to people who earn no more than 50% of a median income in the property's county for a period of no less than 10 years.
- 3) Give the Department of Administration flexibility in setting up the grant program so that not only can funds be used to bring empty units up to code but also be used for landlord risk mitigation for landlords who rent units to people receiving housing subsidies, such as HUD Rental Assistance or Section 8 vouchers, who damage units in order to incentivize landlords into renting to people with subsidies.

Additionally, please include in these bills an additional 2.0 FTE positions for the Department of Administration to administer the larger funding amounts and new programs potentially created by these bills.

This legislation is a good step in the direction towards ending homelessness in Wisconsin. I urge your committee and the State Senate to pass these bills. Thank you very much, again, for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Michael Basford

Director

State of Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness

Continuum of Care for the City & County of Racine, (WI-502)

Testimony of Teresa Reinders on behalf of the Racine Continuum of Care, Racine, WI
SB119/AB123, SB120/AB121, SB121/AB125 and SB144/AB124

Senate Public Hearing, Committee on Utilities and Housing
Tuesday, August 13, 2019

Thank you for providing this opportunity to address these proposed bills. I am Teresa Reinders, the Director of the Continuum of Care for the City & County of Racine and I am here on behalf of the Racine CoC to speak in favor of *SB119/AB123, SB120/AB121, SB121/AB125 and SB144/AB124*.

Racine County has approximately 1000 individuals who experience homelessness each year. The reasons are many, but there are commonalities – mental illness, physical disability, addiction, loss of job – often due to lay-off or being temporary in nature, fleeing due to domestic violence, and unexpected medical emergencies and costs. Some lack the income needed to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency and housing stability. Many lack basic education and employment skills, and others have skills but are unable to function in the work environment for various reasons.

While some of those experiencing homelessness will require a minimal level of case management and services, many will require a much more intensive level. The needs, and complexity of those needs, require a higher degree of skill and amount of time. Case managers often carry large caseloads – over 30 households. Large caseloads are not conducive to providing the level of case management that is needed for this population. The ideal case load would be in the 15 – 20 household range. Shelters are often placed in a difficult position trying to balance client needs with budget constraints.

One challenge we continually face throughout Racine County is the lack of affordable and habitable housing and we know from our conversations with the other Continuum of Care organizations in Wisconsin and throughout the county, we are not the only ones facing this issue. Our Continuum of Care providers operate from a Housing First philosophy which encourages placing individuals experiencing homelessness into housing while providing supportive services that will lead to stabilization, however, this effort is often thwarted because affordable and habitable housing is not available.

The affordable and habitable housing that does exist is in great demand, and landlords may not be willing to rent to someone who has turned around their circumstances, but has a history of poor credit, evictions, criminality and other factors. Using the fair market rate for housing in Racine county, the average annual cost to provide housing and supportive services to a household is \$13,500. An adequate supply of affordable and habitable housing, coupled with an adequate source of funding for temporary rental assistance and supportive services, would allow movement from shelter to housing, as well as subsequent stabilization, at a much faster rate than we are currently experience.

The Racine Continuum of Care is in favor of these bills and these are some of the reasons.

SB119/AB123 - *Increasing funding to the Housing Assistance Program* allows the expansion of an already successful resource to additional persons and communities. The rental assistance and accompanying supportive services allow access to housing and services needed to stabilize a household.

SB120/AB121- *Housing Navigators* are able develop a network of landlords that results in the identification of affordable and habitable housing. They also build relationships with landlords which makes it more likely that landlords will agree to take a chance on risky renters – those with poor credit, and history of criminality or evictions.

SB121/AB125 – *Habitability issues* often exist because many landlords – particularly those involved in small operations, already have a very small profit margin and cannot afford repairs that would improve habitability. Loans provided by this bill provide a mechanism to improve habitability and will place these units back into the low-income, or affordable housing market. These loans benefit both the prevention and housing sides of the continuum of services needed to end homelessness.

SB144/AB124 – *Defraying housing costs and providing funds for diversion programming* provides much need resources. Diversion and prevention are areas which often help reduce inflow to shelters and the with fewer individuals and families who need a light touch for stability, case managers can focus on those individuals whose needs require more intensive help. In addition to targeting persons and families of low income, we appreciate the inclusion of those who are within the moderate-income range who are often precariously balancing budgets and on the verge of needing help to retain their housing.

The end result of all of these bills is greater access to affordable and habitable housing, and shorter stays in shelter. A robust Crisis Response System, which includes these bills, is imperative if we are to effectively address homelessness in Wisconsin. Thank you for your attention, and for providing the opportunity to testify in favor of these bills.



Dear Committee Members:

Today, I testify in favor of SB 119, 120, 121 and 144 on behalf of the Homeless Services Consortium (HSC) which is the Continuum of Care for Madison/Dane County.

The solution to homelessness is housing. Our CoC recognizes that placing people in housing alone will not solve homelessness. Rather, we must provide support services that correspond with the household's level of need. Dane County has engaged in improvements of our homeless crisis response system in an effort to be more efficient, effective and ensure households are getting the appropriate level of service. There has been a lot of great work completed, but more needs to be done.

On, August 12, 2019, there were 135 households with children and 565 single adults identified in Dane County as experiencing homelessness. In order to meet the needs of these folks, we will need additional funding resources.

In 2018, the CoC surveyed HSC members to learn their top funding priorities for 2019. The survey was completed by 145 people, including 49 who were guests at The Beacon (homeless day resource center). One of the main areas identified is a need for increased Eviction Prevention Services and Dollars. Our Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness has two strategies where an increase in these services will help meet our goals. We know that experiencing homelessness is very traumatic for households and want to prevent that trauma whenever possible. We support SB 144 to increase prevention funds to help households remain in their homes. We also support the addition of diversion funding at the state level. We know that some households may not have permanent housing, but have a safe place to stay while they look for housing. With diversion funds, we can assist these households to stay in the safe place and help them locate permanent housing. Our community has seen success with diversion programming with families obtaining permanent housing without entering the shelter system. We hope to expand this success to other populations.

Another area that was identified as needing increase resources was Housing Navigation. Dane County's Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness identifies three strategies that include an increase in housing navigation services. An increase in this service will help our community reach the goals of ending Veteran and Family homelessness and can also serve as a diversion strategy to locate permanent housing for those households who are doubled up or self-paying in hotels. We support SB 120 as it will allow new funds to come to our community to connect people to permanent housing which will prevent or end their homelessness.

Survey respondents also noted affordable housing as a top priority. The HSC supports SB 119 to increase funds for the Housing Assistance Program as our Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness has 13 strategies that are linked to an increase in affordability. These funds will allow our community to provide additional rental assistance and supportive services to people experiencing homelessness.



Written Testimony for August 13, 2019 Hearing Senate Committee on Utilities and Housing

Dear Members of the Committee,

I would like to thank you for hearing Senate Bill 119, 120, 121 and 144 today. These four bills, along with the other four bills authorized by your colleagues, represent the culmination of work done by the Wisconsin Interagency Council including the "A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success" statewide action plan presented last fall. The plan specifically calls for \$3.75 million in new state spending annually. This would more than double the state's current investment in the homeless crisis response system.

My name is Carrie Poser and I am the Wisconsin Balance of State CoC Director. Currently, I serve on the Wisconsin Interagency Council as a member, representing the Balance of State CoC. I realize the term CoC might not be familiar to those outside of the homeless service sector. A CoC (or Continuum of Care) is a geographically defined territory recognized by HUD and required to create and maintain a homeless crisis response system. In Wisconsin, there are four of these CoCs: Dane, Milwaukee, Racine, and everything else falls into the Balance of State. The Balance of State Continuum of Care is a 501c3 non-profit organization with a twenty-one coalition membership. Each coalition represents a specific smaller area – some made up of one county (such as Kenosha, Waukesha, and Brown). Others, covering multiple counties (such as Dairyland – Eau Claire, Jackson, Trempealeau, and Buffalo; or North Central – Marathon, Wood, and Lincoln). There are three paid staff (including myself) and a volunteer Board of Directors. The purpose of our organization is to ensure efficient and effective delivery of housing and supportive services to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and provide leadership to the twenty-one local homeless coalitions that cover the BOS territory. I am responsible for the day-to-day activities and operation of the organization. In partnership with the local coalitions and Board of Directors, the goal is to end homelessness in Wisconsin.

To end homelessness, a CoC brings together people working in a variety of sectors in order to develop a community-wide plan or homeless crisis response system. The system should address what happens when people are at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. The system must include prevention, diversion, outreach, assessment, housing search, housing assistance, case management, and follow up services. To maintain this type of system, it requires the input and resources beyond homeless service providers. It is critical that a variety of people with different skills sets, knowledge, and experience are brought together, including law enforcement, social service providers, mental health agencies, public housing authorities, hospitals, school districts, victim service providers, faith-based organizations, businesses, government agencies and officials, affordable housing developers,



universities and colleges, people with lived experience, and other private sector organizations. HUD requires CoCs to carry out a variety of additional tasks, such as set prioritization policies and standards for services, use coordinated entry, conduct point-in-time counts, monitor and evaluate performance, conduct an annual gaps analysis, and consult with the Division of Energy, Housing, and Community Resources (DEHCR) as the ESG grant administrator for the State. In addition, the CoC participates annually in a nationwide competition for federal funds. There are approximately 400 CoCs in the country. The competition requires the CoC to explain their structure, data collection, adherence to HUD requirements, and progress in ending homelessness for veterans, people experiencing chronic homelessness, families, and youth. Individual member organizations can apply for projects that will provide housing assistance funds and case management.

The strength of a CoC comes from the tireless efforts of local leaders, skilled case managers, and dedicated staff committed to preventing homelessness, diverting those that present for homeless shelter when possible, providing shelter and crisis services, connecting people to available mainstream resources, finding housing for people. Providers across the State have maximized the available federal and state resources, using nationally accepted best practices, and radically altered the way they do business - embracing a housing first philosophy and tailoring housing assistance and services to people's unique needs and strengths. Despite all of this, the number of people experiencing homelessness in WI continues to drop by less than 6% a year.

On any given night, there are over 4,900 people in Wisconsin without a place to call home. They are sleeping in a shelter, in their car, under a bridge, in a cave, or in a storage unit. Some may be sleeping in a transitional living program. But all of them lack a safe, stable, and permanent home. Homelessness is a statewide, nonpartisan issue. It impacts every single county in Wisconsin. In 2018, over 20,000 people in Wisconsin received some type of homeless assistance. 59% of those people were served outside of Dane, Milwaukee, or Racine counties. As of yesterday, there were over 2,600 households waiting for housing assistance identified through our coordinated entry system (over 2000 households without children and 618 households with children) in the 69 counties covered by the Balance of State CoC. This also includes 390 chronically homeless households and 124 veteran households. One of the remarkable things about our system is that we have data that can demonstrate the need, identify gaps, and illustrate the performance of our system. We can quantify the need at a CoC level and local coalition level. We can show how many people are identified, what type of interventions are needed, and which tools are missing to meet those needs.

For example, as of August 7th:

In the Lakeshore coalition, which includes Door, Kewaunee, Manitowoc and Sheboygan counties - there are 55 households (19 families and 36 singles) identified as homeless and waiting for help; 2 are chronically homeless, 1 veteran, and 11 households are fleeing domestic violence. This is 2% of the Balance of State CoC's homeless population.



In the Winnebago coalition, which includes Fond du Lac, Green Lake, and Winnebago counties – there are 183 households (49 families and 134 singles) identified as homeless and waiting for help; 22 are chronically homeless, 6 are veterans, and 39 households are fleeing domestic violence. This is 7% of the Balance of State CoC's homeless population.

In the Kenosha coalition – there are 109 households (23 families and 86 singles) identified as homeless and waiting for help; 8 are chronically homeless, 7 are veterans and 7 households are fleeing domestic violence. This is 4% of the Balance of State CoC's homeless population.

In the Northwest coalition, which includes Ashland, Bayfield, Douglas, Iron and Price counties - there are 48 households (30 families and 18 singles) identified as homeless and waiting for help; 3 are chronically homeless, 2 are veterans and 11 households are fleeing domestic violence. This is 2% of the Balance of State CoC's homeless population.

While each of these communities have a variety of housing programs and emergency shelter services, there remains a need for different tools and more resources to address the growing need. Lack of affordable housing is certainly a reality, but so is working and negotiating with current landlords as well as creating different types of programming that will help address barriers faced by people precariously housed or in need of more intensive case management than current programming or funding levels will allow.

People cannot contribute to society, achieve their potential, or create lasting change in their lives unless and until they have a safe and stable place to live. I strongly believe that the two bills here today will provide critical support to the homeless crisis response system designed to address the needs of everyone by tailoring help (whether it is housing assistance, case management, or connection to mainstream services) and taking into account an individual's resiliency and strengths. Never before has state funding sought to support multiple components of the system or across a continuum of services. Many of which cannot be paid for with federal funds. Taken as a whole, these efforts will be a monumental movement toward ending homelessness in Wisconsin.

Senate Bill 119 - Increase Funding for Housing Assistance Program

The Housing Assistance Program (HAP) is authorized under Wisconsin Statute 16.306 to provide grants to operate housing and associated supportive services for the homeless. These programs are designed to facilitate access to permanent housing and self-sufficiency. During the 2017-2019 Wisconsin State Budget, HAP was expanded from only transitional housing program eligibility to include all housing program types. Unfortunately, the funds have not increased and are insufficient to meet the growing need in Wisconsin.

HAP can be used in different ways. An agency can use the HAP funds to provide case management at higher levels and meet more intensive needs than current funding would allow. An agency can create



a new housing first-based project to provide housing and services to a population in their community that is not yet chronically homeless but has a long history of homelessness. An agency can create a rapid re-housing project specifically for those struggling with addiction issues or youth bouncing from couch to couch. The key component is that with more funding, communities can look at their data and determine what tools are missing to address their needs and create possible solutions.

Senate Bill 120 - Housing Navigation

Ending homelessness requires finding a place to live. For people experiencing homelessness, barriers to securing housing include the cost of rent, the low quality or availability of housing stock, and landlords unwilling to rent to people with lower incomes or who are working with housing programs. Housing navigators address these issues. Housing navigators are different than case managers; they focus not on the specific issues related to a program participant, but rather on increasing the pool of potential housing options while addressing landlord concerns. Housing navigators outreach directly to landlords and management companies helping to bridge the gap between the needs of the business and the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Through this endeavor, in the few communities that have tried a housing navigator, success has been achieved by creating new partnerships, re-establishing old relationships with landlords, and increasing overall positive relationships among the parties. They meet one-on-one with landlords to address concerns and explain the programming options available. Federal funding does not pay for this service. Yet, without qualified housing navigation to assist with housing search and placement, people remain in homelessness longer and run out of shelter options faster because of this delay. The proposed bill will create a funding mechanism and require the CoC's to develop best practice standards for the use of housing navigators. We will be able to track progress through data, especially as it relates to length of stay in homelessness.

Senate Bill 121 – Landlord Assistance

Federally funded housing programs, such as Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, HOME Tenant-Based Rental Assistance, and CoC-funded housing programs, require housing units to be “clean, safe, and sanitary.” To ensure this, all potential units must pass a Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection. This inspection is comprehensive and includes the inside and outside of the unit. Before working for the CoC, I worked for a non-profit housing provider and did HQS inspections in rural northwestern Wisconsin. Once you find a landlord willing to work with you, the last thing you want is to give them is a long list of repairs and costs they must incur for you to sign a lease. Unfortunately, this happens frequently – especially in rural Wisconsin and with private landlords who own a few units here or there. While there are several funding streams that will help build or rehabilitate housing units, there is currently no easily available funding source to specifically address this type of need. Expanding housing stock and enhancing relationships with landlords is necessary in order to house vulnerable people waiting for help.

Senate Bill 144 – Increase Funding for Homeless Prevention and Diversion



To end homelessness for everyone, there must be an investment in a variety of interventions. Entering the homelessness response system should be a last resort and prevented whenever possible. However, services are needed to help people in crisis navigate through community supports, problem solve, and connect to mainstream services. Investing financial assistance into situations in which a household can keep their current housing is less traumatic for everyone involved; especially when finding a new unit will be even more challenging with an eviction on their record or a negative landlord reference in addition to whatever barriers to maintaining stable housing exist. Unfortunately, funding for prevention is rare and limited. The services must be targeted and intentional in order to truly prevent homeless episodes from occurring. This bill increases prevention funding through an already existing grant, the Homeless Prevention Program, authorized under Wisconsin Statute 16.303. By identifying specific funding for targeted prevention services with the intended outcome of resolving the crisis and preventing the household from entering the homeless system, prevention can be a very effective tool.

In addition, this bill would add diversion as an eligible activity under the Homeless Prevention Program. Diversion involves qualified staff engaging in problem solving conversations. By helping families take a pause in their moment of chaos, to help them find alternative safe solutions. Diversion can prevent people from having to experience homelessness by avoiding shelter, maintaining their current housing arrangements or identify safe and acceptable alternatives, connecting them with mainstream and community resources, and when needed, provides limited financial assistance to return to permanent housing. To engage in this intentional problem solving activity, funding is necessary to hire dedicated and trained staff. As a result of this type of programming, people that enter emergency shelters will be those identified as having no safe alternative housing or options rather than the traditional first-come, first-serve shelter approach.

Prevention and diversion progress can be reviewed, adjustments made, and targeting enhanced by using data to track outcomes.

These four bills will create or expand a component of the homeless crisis response system across the state for people who slept in their car or a shelter last night.

(1) By increasing funding for housing assistance programs, agencies can offer different programming specifically tailored to meet the needs of people in crisis. Ending homelessness will not happen with a one size fits all approach, rather we need an intentional tailoring of the right intervention to address a given need. Housing Assistance Program (HAP) funds can create opportunities to link current assistance programs with needed case management services, provide intensive case management services that current funding does not allow, and allows for communities to add different tools to the tool box.

(2) By creating new funding for housing navigators, people in crisis have a better chance at finding a place to live within their community. Housing navigators are trained to address landlord concerns,



mitigate issues as they arise, and act as a liaison between the housing program – the program participant – and the landlord. Housing navigation decreases the time spent homeless. This funding provides for a missing resource in the homeless crisis response system.

(3) By creating new funding to help landlords make necessary repairs they can provide housing to those in their community. This funding provides for a critical component missing in the homeless crisis response system, a mechanism to increase housing resources currently available but unable to be used.

(4) Ending homelessness requires investment in a variety of interventions and tools including prevention and diversion. Preventing a household from sleeping in a shelter or their car by providing limited financial services and case management assistance to retain the apartment is a critical component to reducing the number of people that enter homelessness each day. Diverting those households from entering shelter who have safe alternative options and natural supports is also key to reducing the number of people that enter homelessness. Targeted prevention and problem solving conversations involve investments in trained and qualified staff.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit written testimony today and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carrie Poser".

Carrie Poser

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Wisconsin Balance of State CoC
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Wisconsin Community Action Program Association



August 13, 2019

TO: The Members of the Committee on Utilities and Housing

FROM: Brad Paul, Executive Director

Re: Senate Bill 119; SB 120; SB 121; SB 144;
Assembly Bill 121; AB 123; AB 124; AB 125

WISCAP is a statewide association of Wisconsin's 16 Community Action Agencies and two single purpose agencies working to fight poverty in Wisconsin. WISCAP and its members are committed to creating economic opportunity and supporting community-based solutions to poverty. As a leader in efforts to address poverty in Wisconsin, we keenly understand the need for policies that promote economic equality and that provide pathways for the Community Action network and its many partners to address needs of Wisconsinites with low income. Community Action Agencies work in urban, rural, and suburban communities alike – operating in 69 counties. Local agencies are governed by a tripartite board consisting of low-income individuals, elected officials or their representatives, and community members from among business, industry, labor, religious, law enforcement, education, or other major groups and interests in the community served. This unique structure helps to ensure the whole community is involved in prioritizing, designing and implementing services that are responsive to local needs.

Our comments on the proposed legislation fall into two categories; [1] the broad perspective on homelessness policy and [2] specific comments with respect to the individual bills.

[1] Homelessness in Wisconsin

Homelessness and the deep poverty that underlies it is a serious issue in Wisconsin. The Institute for Research on Poverty reports that more than 1 in 10 Wisconsinites live in poverty and 37.5% of Wisconsinites struggle to afford the necessities of housing, child care, health care, food, and transportation, according to the 2018 United Way *ALICE Study of Financial Hardship*. And, while unemployment remains low, housing costs have increased out of proportion to income. Over three hundred thousand low-income renters in the state pay more than half their income on housing; Although certainly a vast undercount due to its limited scope and methodology, the 2018 Point-in-Time estimate reveals that there are close to 5,000 homeless individuals on a single night in Wisconsin. Within that, the Balance of State Continuum of Care catchment area includes the country's 4th highest number of homeless families with children (1600+) in rural areas. Other counts and public systems, including our schools and Head Start programs, report significant increases in children and youth homelessness. Last year, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction counted over 19,000 homeless children and youth enrolled in public schools. Seventy-seven percent were staying with others temporarily due to lack of alternatives, and 7% were in motels when they were identified as homeless. Put differently, 84% of the homeless children and youth in Wisconsin schools are not considered homeless under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) narrow definition. And, despite a national prioritization and targeting of resources, the number of homeless individuals considered "chronic" by HUD

increased for the second consecutive year. In short, these realities are felt across Wisconsin. Whether we put our trust in public or private-sector solutions we must at least be honest about just how many of our neighbors struggle and how any meaningful response must include all sectors of society.

With regards to the statewide response to homelessness, local Community Action Agencies provide a wide range of programs and services, including emergency shelter, eviction prevention, transitional and permanent housing, job training, and a range of supportive services. In 2017, Community Action Agencies across the state helped 6,115 people obtain or maintain affordable housing. In addition, 4,025 low-income households were provided with emergency rent, mortgage assistance, and temporary shelter through our network. For their part, local housing authorities in Wisconsin occupy a key place in homelessness prevention through the operation of publicly-owned housing for low-income households. Similarly, housing authorities and private market owners' alike contract to secure both project-based and tenant-based Section 8 rent subsidies that help families and individuals both exit and avoid homelessness altogether. DOA's administration of HUD supportive housing resources and WHEDA's execution of the Federal LIHTC provides further support for the creation of units targeted to low-income households. Finally, a broad and informal network of faith-based, community-based and non-profit organizations that operate outside of the "homeless system" provide crucial support and services that often go unnoticed, uncounted, and largely unfunded by government sources. Taken together, this formation of public and private groups collectively provides emergency and longer-term relief in addressing the very complex and stubbornly persistent crisis of homelessness.

WISCAP is supportive of each piece of proposed legislation being considered by the committee today. Should these bills move forward, given the diverse nature of affected populations and service provider organizations, we encourage maximum flexibility in departmental rule making and the implementation process.

[2] Comments on:

Assembly Bill 121 and Senate Bill 120

Relating to: housing navigator grants and making an appropriation

HUD-mandated housing first and rapid rehousing models by themselves do not create new units or open tight rental markets. Adding additional resources to help identify and secure a full range of housing options, however, can play a meaningful role in reducing housing insecurity. Moreover, for a variety of reasons, including past evictions, criminal convictions, and credit history, landlords can be resistant to renting to homeless families and individuals. This bill will add important resources to allow local housing navigators to work with housing providers, prospective tenants, and case managers to identify available units for those seeking affordable housing.

Assembly Bill 123 and Senate Bill 119

Relating to: housing grants to homeless individuals and families and making an appropriation.

The Housing Assistance Program provides grants to private, nonprofit organizations; Community Action Agencies; and county or municipal governments for operating housing and associated supportive services for the homeless. Through this funding, Community Action Agencies and other entities have been able to provide a range of activities in support of housing operations, including case management, rental assistance, and transportation. Flat funded in recent years, however, the program would benefit from an increase to allow for an expansion of housing assistance.

Assembly Bill 125 and Senate Bill 121

Relating to: housing quality standards loans, granting rule-making authority, and making an appropriation.

The American Community Survey identifies more than 685,000 occupied units of "inadequate housing" in Wisconsin. Additionally, more than 63% of all housing units in urban areas and over one third of all units in rural parts of the state were built before 1960. Providing loans to housing providers to satisfy quality standards is an important step in bringing more affordable units on line. In addition, we would urge the committee to work with DOA to explore ways to incentivize participation from landlords who do not currently rent to low and moderate income families.

Assembly Bill 124 and Senate Bill 144

Relating to: grants to defray housing costs and for diversion programming and making an appropriation.

We strongly support an expansion of homelessness prevention funds which can be used for rent payments, utility deposits and payments, housing placement, case management and individualized services to facilitate housing stability, and mediation and legal services to prevent the loss of housing. With respect to diversion programming, we ask that DOA be given maximum flexibility in designing diversion program rules and grant distribution.