
Testimony from Dakota Atterberry, ODFC Youth Advisory Board Member

Hello my name is Dakota Atterberry and I am 23 years old. I am a single mother of 4. I currently live in a transitional living program called Malta House. I have been experiencing homelessness for 4 years now. During this time, I have lived in abandoned buildings, parks, hallways and other random places. Because I was homeless, I lost my kids to DCF. Because I was homeless, I had to do unthinkable things to survive. I was at a point in my life where using drugs seemed like my only option to get through each day. Being a victim of abuse seemed okay, because I had nothing and I had nobody who was there for me. In 2016, I left NY in mid winter and came to CT where I found out I was pregnant with my, now, 4 month old son. I knew I needed a change in my lifestyle.

I called 211 and they were there for me. The person on the phone took the time to give me resources for a place to stay for the night until they found me a shelter. Not only that, but a place to get food and get out of the cold. They placed me within two weeks at Inspirica's Women's Shelter. I stayed there for 4 months until a case worker there helped me get into the Malta House for pregnant and parenting young females. Without people like them, I don't know where I'd be. Within the 10 months that I have been there, I have accomplished so much. I have completed substance abuse classes, obtained my high school diploma and found permanent work. I am living proof of what you fund! Without these programs I don't know where I would've been or if I would still be alive.

If you cut the funding for homeless youth services and housing, it will effect me and my children personally, putting us at risk for being back in the situation I fought so hard to overcome. But additionally, it will also put a lot of my peers who are experiencing homelessness at risk as well; people like the mothers at Malta House, my Youth Advisory Board team members, like Autumn and Kevin, my spouse Chad. These few people I listed are just a tiny percentage of the youth who are unstably housed or homeless. I also think about my other single mothers, my LGBT peers, the youth dealing with depression, bipolar disorder and other mental illness, the youth who were abused and abandoned, those who fell to addiction who live with homelessness everyday. Cutting this funding will sentence them to life on the streets. Young people can die or enter into lives where they are lost forever when they remain homeless. This funding gives us an opportunity. Because of your support, I stand here today, not as a victim but as a survivor. Thank you for your time and for listening. I speak for all of us when I say, we are not defined by our situation. We are people who strive everyday to overcome the struggle of homelessness. We are your sons, daughters, grandchildren, mothers,

fathers, students and peers. Everyday I wake up and I fight for another day and I will continue to strive for nothing but the best! And with your continued support I will no doubt achieve my goals.

Testimony From Youth Advisory Board Member, Barovier Allybose

My name is Barovier Allybose. I am 23 years. I currently live in Norwalk, Connecticut and work with Supportive Housing Works as an advisor on the Opening Doors Fairfield County Youth Advisory Board. A part of our responsibility is to contribute effective measures to the statewide cause of ending youth homelessness by 2020.

The youth with whom I work, like myself, have histories of homelessness or are still homeless and working to ensure that their situation is not prolonged. At the same time, we are working to ensure that no other youth has to become a victim of homelessness, especially in our county. The reality that these youth experience is often times far beyond what our legislature and the average citizen may be able to understand but the conditions are inhumane.

I experienced transitional homelessness in 2014, a result of leaving home due to the homophobic environment that I was living in. For several months I struggled to find food. I hardly had any clothes. I left home with what I had on my back. I had just migrated from my home country fleeing persecution perpetuated by homophobia. When I left my family's house I had nowhere to go. What may have been an improved situation (because I was able to live free of violence or persecution) transformed into a whole new challenge of its own. What I had known to be homelessness became more than a notion. My struggles would mature into situations where I would be left at the bus stop without a dime to pay my fare, waiting in line for food and clothes and waiting endlessly to get a call about any new housing opportunities. 211 was atop of my call list. My only hope was to find the right people, who understood my situation and who could tell me what to do. It was an entire learning process.

For days I was breathless and numb from walking in the cold. A few nights I slept in the park, or in the train station until I got kicked out.

For the most part, I was exposed to the ruthless nature of homelessness. I felt lost, confused, tired and hopeless. I was lucky enough to hear about Triangle Community Center, a nonprofit run LGBT organization in the town of Norwalk. They

connected me to services; they told me as much as they could about my rights. They helped me to get into a transitional housing program that they co-sponsored. It was a big start. It was a shocking start as well but most importantly, I was happy to be in a safe place.

One of the biggest fears I came across was how I would make it back into society.

It occurred to me that I would first have to experience what homelessness was like. I would get to know people who were homeless for different reasons. They were also LGBT; they had an addiction problem, they lost their jobs, they were teenage mothers, they had mental illness, physical/emotional abuse, domestic violence and family relationship breakdown. The same people who I saw standing beside the street asking for a dollar, were standing in the kitchen line with me. My heart throbbed at every moment that I felt that I should be helping them but couldn't help myself.

When it's winter and it's cold, these are the people I stood with at the bus stop. These were the same people I saw in the library reading newspapers or looking for jobs. These were the same people in the parks. In the train station. In the cold. I have seen so many mothers struggle with their children. So many who can only go a few days on food assistance. And so many who got shut down and shut out from housing opportunities. I learnt about their pain by witnessing it. Each day while I was in the adult and saw a mother come home, the other women would ask, how was your day. She is tired and restless, but, "it was OK." She still didn't have a job.

It was frightful. These were women avoiding domestic abuse, they became homeless and they have become double victims - victims to their own problems and to the system they are forced to face. They all bonded in such a way as to overcome the challenges that they encountered in the real world. I stood with them. I helped them to the supermarket. I stayed with their children when they needed a helping hand.

But I was still dealing with my own struggle. There was so much ahead of me and I didn't know what to expect but I worked relentlessly to get out of the shelter, to get into transitional housing and then to find a more stable place to live.

Homelessness groups us into a category. Others recognize that we don't have a roof over our head and as a result, view us as one and the same, with their preconceived ideas. That alone is not homelessness. It leaves out our stories.

I am confident enough to tell you that there are many great organizations, such as Triangle Community Center, Mid Fairfield Aids Project, Open Door Shelter, 211, Person to Person etc., all here in Connecticut that are doing a great job to help solve homelessness. There will be weaknesses and gaps and that is why funding is important. We cannot go back to how things were in the past. These organizations do not only need help from the few people who are willing to make donations and volunteer but they also need a strong foundation and that can only come from our government, our town officials and our public representatives. At the moment their work needs to continue, and they need substantial improvements in certain areas. If they cannot effectively balance the waiting list vs the workload that confronts them each day, they cannot function, and homelessness cannot be solved. More youth will continue to be on our streets and more mothers will be unable to fend for their children. There is no justice in gutting the benefits of the most vulnerable people in society. I would imagine that we are here to protect them.

Also, keep in mind that ending homeless, or simply taking one person from a state of homelessness to having a home, is not a one time shot. It is a long term goal that requires sustainable long term strategies to enhance the welfare of those affected. Funding is just one challenge in this whole picture. If funding is our problem, if the bookkeeper, the case manager, the executive director, the group facilitator, the volunteer has to focus more on funding than any other pressing issue, then it leaves less room for us to strive.

We are at a point where, in the United States, overbearing issues such as homelessness are weighed and given value based on a budget. That undermines the integrity of humans who who need to get off our streets. They too deserve to have a voice. But do they?

Solving homelessness goes beyond job training and case management. A sustainable society, I can imagine, depends on

these people getting back into their homes and back to work. That is why I am involved, that is why the Youth Advisory Board of Opening Doors Fairfield County is involved. We all want to share our concern, our voice, to defend the defenseless. Please consider this the human rights issue that it is. Anyone can be homeless. Financial/budgetary struggles promises us that more people are likely to go homeless. We have a trend where working class people are still struggling. Homelessness is a threat to more and more young people during these hard times. From prevention of mass evictions, to emergency shelters, to effective services and housing solutions, solving youth homelessness in the state of Connecticut should be a priority. Any cuts to the \$2.3 Million dollars in the current budget sends the wrong message. I am asking every town representative and stakeholder to consider that homeless youth are among the weakest in our society and our cause to defend them is a measure of our our dignity. Please consider, please defend, please ask and please help our homeless. Above all, keep in mind that there are many talented and educated people on our streets, please allow people to do what they can. Please help them to give back to society. Do not restrict them, do not defund them... help them!

My Testimony

Hello, my name is Autumn Corley. I am currently a resident at Malta House, a transitional home for woman with children. I came to Malta House after going homeless at the young age of 17 years old. My mother became ill with cancer, lost her job and could no longer provide for us with her health and mental illnesses. WE ended up living from family member to family member, house to house. I knew I needed change when I found myself pregnant. With that being said Malta house is one of the best shelters I have ever been through, they understand. Ending youth homelessness plays a big part in my life because I can actually say I know exactly what it feels like. Nothing in this world is worse than genuinely not knowing where you are going to lay your head or what is going to be your next meal at such a young age. Not only does it take a toll on physical health, but mental health as well. It can literally drive you insane. Cutting the funds for youth homelessness or homelessness in general would be so devastating to the community in so many ways. Providing funds for the homeless gives people like myself a chance to better there life for themselves and their children. I started off just a hotheaded 16 year old girl stealing and smoking to make myself feel better. I am now a 20 year old mom who's been clean for 2 years, got my driving permit, and I am scheduled to start Dental Assisting school in the fall. We are walking and living proof on a change that you guys make. Saving people is not only the right thing to do, to me it is also the smartest choice there is.