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**Testimony of Connecticut State Senate Minority Leader John McKinney before the
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity**

Re: Reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Financial Services**

October 4, 2007

Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member Capito, members of the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity: thank you for holding these hearings and thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of a bill and a cause that is dear to my heart. I would also like to make special mention of my congressman and friend, Chris Shays for his leadership on this issue, as well as my former colleague, Congressman Chris Murphy. Lastly, I want to thank Financial Services Committee chairman Frank for his steadfast leadership on our nation's housing issues.

My name is John McKinney and I am the Minority Leader of the Connecticut State Senate. I also serve as the Ranking Member of the Select Committee on Housing. Perhaps of more interest, I am the son of the late Congressman Stewart McKinney, who served as a Member of Congress from 1970 to 1987, and for whom the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is named.

I am here today because I believe, as my father believed, and as I know all of you believe, that every American deserves and has a right to a roof over their head at night; to a home.

I am here today to ask you to reauthorize the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and expand our federal government's role in the fight to end homelessness in America.

My father was among the earliest and staunchest advocates for the homeless. He watched with great concern in the early 1980s as a flawed and fragmented policy toward homelessness started to unravel. At the time, our country really didn't have a federal policy to deal with the problem of homelessness. As a nation, we thought then, that state and local governments were better equipped to address the issue. And we didn't really understand the underlying social and economic problems that were causing substantial growth in the homeless population.

Local and state resources funded soup kitchens, shelters and public service announcements. But, while these efforts helped people cope with *being* homeless, they rarely helped anyone *escape* homelessness. We were, in effect, treating the symptoms, but not the disease.

And so, while local and state efforts intensified, we made little progress and the numbers of homeless people continued to grow.

In 1986, my father helped craft and Congress ultimately passed legislation we now know as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. It was the first major coordinated federal response to homelessness in our nation's history. While it was a tremendous first step, it was just that: a first step. We were supposed to do more. Sadly, over the past 20 years since this law first passed, we have not followed through on the promise to do more to combat homelessness.

Reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act by this Congress will get us back on the right track and help fulfill the promises made two decades ago.

Over the past 20 years, the face of homelessness has changed. It is no longer only single men or the mentally ill who are sleeping on streets or inhabiting emergency shelters. Today, it is all too common to see mothers and their children – entire families – arrive at an emergency shelter in need of a place to sleep.

Another dramatic change has occurred over the last 20 years: we no longer need simply to manage homelessness, we can end it.

In my home state of Connecticut, we are doing just that – we are working to end homelessness, not just manage it.

Today we know that people who are homeless need a helping hand out of poverty and distress and into housing stability. One of the most promising solutions to achieve this is supportive housing. For many, the combination of affordability, together with support, is the right recipe for personal success.

In Connecticut, private and public funding is helping open doors to new housing opportunities and new hope. We are about 10 years into an effective supportive housing movement and we are seeing the impact it can make in the lives of children and adults.

Given adequate resources and time, some people who become homeless will find their way into a permanent home on their own. But for many, homelessness is intertwined with chronic health problems, lack of education, poverty, unemployment, or substance addictions.

These individuals and families can cycle in and out of homelessness for years, accessing services only in reaction to crisis situations, or not at all. They may return repeatedly to emergency shelters simply because they lack other resources to maintain a stable, permanent living situation.

In Connecticut, a point in time survey this past winter – the first coordinated statewide survey – found an estimated 3,325 households experienced homelessness on the night of January 30. Of those, 2,138 single adults and nearly 392 families with minor children resided in emergency shelters or transitional programs. Almost 40 families and more than 700 single adults were living on the streets, in parks, cars, transportation terminals and other locations not intended for human habitation.

In my hometown of Fairfield, an affluent suburb of 60,000 where the average price of a home exceeds \$750,000, Operation Hope, a local nonprofit agency providing innovative solutions to homelessness reports that the number of people calling in need of shelter and housing has been rising steadily over the years. In just the last six months, 510 people called in need of immediate shelter, 89 others called in need of support services and were at-risk of homelessness. These are in addition to the hundreds served each month through various other housing and support programs.

On top of this current situation, sub-prime lending crisis has increased the number of families living on the edge of financial insecurity – just one medical emergency or interest rate hike away from losing their homes.

Connecticut is a leader in supportive housing. To date, there are 3,000 units of permanent supportive housing that have been created or are in the pipeline, and McKinney funding has been critically important to this development. State and local funds have been used to leverage federal dollars, including McKinney funding, to pay for supportive housing. Supportive housing's operating expenses (utilities, maintenance, insurance and property taxes) are also funded in part through McKinney funding that comes to local continuums of care across the state.

McKinney funding allocated by HUD is not enough. While in the late 1990s these funds sparked new development of supportive housing, today the funds only cover the expenses of keeping current housing open. Communities aren't getting a boost in funding to ensure the continued operation of current housing stock and to inspire new locally determined developments. While renewal grants are important (these housing programs rely on the HUD funding to ensure the affordability of these units), we need new funding to jumpstart the next phase of supportive housing development.

Let me give you an example from my hometown: Operation Hope used McKinney funding from HUD to open units for 6 families and 6 single adults between 1999 and 2001. These homes still receive HUD funding for operating and supportive services costs. But HUD funding is no longer available for future development. Operation Hope has had to develop the next 12 units without any HUD funding.

The model developed by Operation Hope—non-urban scattered site development—works well for communities and people who are homeless. Integrating supportive housing directly into thriving neighborhoods is the best way to help families who were once homeless in a way that will enrich the communities around them. This model is especially good for children who benefit from seeing their parents maintain their households and get up and go to work like everyone else in the neighborhood.

But we need new capital funding to spur future development. While the state has tried to pick up the slack, our current efforts, via a program called “Next Steps”, is oversubscribed—there are many more developments proposed than there is money to cover.

In Connecticut, our goal is to end homelessness by 2014 through the creation of 10,000 units of supportive housing. We have 7,000 units to go. We need federal dollars, combined with state and local funds to make this a reality.

This is an important and fiscally smart investment of federal funds; it is an investment in a proven model—a better investment than the current emergency system consisting only of jails, emergency rooms and shelters.

Imagine if we could take the 89 people on the services waitlist at Operation Hope or the 510 people on the shelter list and immediately intervene with financial assistance and support to enable them to stay in their housing and prevent eviction. We could also help them learn to avoid this crisis in the future. Think of the consequences of that emergency aid - children would get to stay in their home, their school, their neighborhoods. Their parents would be less stressed, more steady, and thinking and planning for the future. Local agencies like Operation Hope can help these families, but the financial assistance piece is critical—no matter how much you provide emotional support, job coaching, budgeting assistance and the like—if you don’t have the financial support, there’s no ending the crisis.

For children, chronic homelessness can have a particularly devastating effect. The American Academy of Pediatrics has found that homeless children are more likely than other children to experience trauma-related injuries, developmental delays and chronic disease. Disruptions in education and the effects of living in stressful, chaotic environments can create permanent barriers to success. How wonderful it would be to prevent this from ever happening – and we know it can be done!

I want to share with you the story of a family moving into Jarvis Court supportive housing in Fairfield: a single mother with 2 young children, 6 and 9. She and her children became homeless when her husband abandoned the family and she could not afford to support them on her own. They lived in the family shelter at Operation Hope, and then moved into supportive housing. She suffers from depression--has worked hard with social workers to stabilize her health and to keep a steady job. Her children attend Fairfield schools, but unfortunately, her income is not enough to cover area market rate rents. Thanks to supportive housing, she has a stable home for herself and her kids. To quote this courageous woman, “My children and I have had no place to go. Operation Hope took us in. Every morning we prayed and asked God to help us find some place safe, clean and within our income, and this is exactly what we found at Operation Hope.”

There are success stories like this all across our nation. With reauthorization of the McKinney Act, we will continue to change and improve the lives of millions of people.

In closing, let me touch upon 2 specific issues in the legislation before you.

First, regarding the permanent housing set-aside, Congress has long directed HUD to dedicate at least 30% of funds appropriated for permanent supportive housing. It would be a mistake to remove this set-aside. Legislation reauthorizing McKinney-Vento should codify the 30% set aside because supportive

housing has been highly successful in providing assistance to homeless individuals. Organizations like Operation Hope in Fairfield, Connecticut or St. Luke's Lifeworks in Stamford, Connecticut and organizations like them make incredible use of these funds. Maintaining the set-aside will help meet the critical needs of people, including those disabled by chronic health conditions or long term substance abuse problems. It will also help families with the greatest challenges to stability, who often are not receiving help from any other federal programs.

Second, I want to address the definition of "homeless," which some have proposed broadening to include individuals and families who are living in doubled-up situations and motels, among other circumstances. While it is certainly admirable to want to address all people who are in need, I am concerned this could lead to thinning of resources. Changing the definition could divert resources from those with disabilities who are least likely to seek help or fend for themselves if many more people are competing for the resources provided by the homeless assistance grants programs. I don't think any of us want to see the most troubled and sick homeless get pushed to the back of the line.

So, I call on this Congress to Reauthorize the McKinney-Vento Act. Do it in a generous and responsible way. And then don't stop there.

As Stewart McKinney did 20 years ago, campaign vigorously to end homelessness.

Help bring this issue back to the forefront of political discourse and American consciousness. Write letters, make phone calls, talk to your constituents, encourage volunteerism and philanthropy. Because, while federal funding is important, it is ultimately going to take a more personal commitment to end homelessness. It's ultimately up to people to make this plan work. People like you and I who see the importance of speaking out on this issue. People like those who volunteer their time at Operation HOPE, the Stewart B. McKinney Foundation, or any number of other organizations across this country dedicated to ending homelessness and improving people's lives.

Together, let's make this commitment and take the next step.

Thank you again for holding these hearings and for giving me the opportunity to testify.