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Comments by Deb Polun, Executive Director,
before the Connecticut General Assembly's
Appropriations and Human Services Committees

Public Hearing on
the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Allocation Plan for FFY 2022

September 21, 2021

Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members, and
Members of the Appropriations and Human Services Committees:

Thank you for holding this public hearing on the FFY 2022 Community
Services Block Grant (CSBG) Allocation Plan. The Connecticut Association
for Community Action (CAFCA) is the state association that works with
Connecticut's nine Community Action Agencies (CAAs), the state and federal
designated anti-poverty agencies serving over 200,000 low-income people in all
169 cities and towns across Connecticut.

We are pleased to provide support for the Department of Social Services' FFY
2022 allocation plan for CSBG. This plan will provide base funding for
Connecticut's Community Action Agencies, as well as CAFCA, to allow us to
continue to provide programs and services to Connecticut's low-income
residents. It also provides for training and technical assistance to ensure that all
agencies are run with maximum efficiency and effectiveness, are meeting
federal requirements and standards, and – most importantly – are meeting the
needs of their customers.

About Community Action Agencies

Community Action Agencies were established as part of the War on Poverty,
and the 1,000+ CAAs across the country have a long and proud history of
serving low-income people and communities. The Community Services Block
Grant (CSBG) provides Connecticut's CAA network with essential support for
various programs and services that address the needs of limited-income people.
CSBG helps CAAs provide a service delivery system that is:

- Effective;
- Customer-focused;
- Culturally sensitive;
- Multigenerational; and,
- Integrated.

This comprehensive “no wrong door” approach means that when someone goes to a Community Action Agency for any reason, they are accepted at any contact point and guided through a service system that works to address both short and long-term needs, helping people to achieve and maintain economic stability. Individuals and families may have needs related to housing, food, child care, employment, and more, and CAAs can help address all of those needs in one place – like “one stop shopping.”

CAAs are held accountable to meeting program measures through a variety of accountability measures, including organizational standards, state accountability measures, and the use of Results-Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA).

You can find demographic and other data about CAAs’ work in our [Annual Report](#), as well as stories of people who have been helped by CAAs across our state. I hope you take a few minutes to review these important results, as they truly show Community Action’s impact on Connecticut’s most at-risk and vulnerable people.

The Need for CSBG

As indicated above, CSBG funds are essential to help CAAs help residents across the state, both now and into the future. The combination of slow income growth over the past decade and the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 have made it more difficult for Connecticut families to make ends meet. Although the federal stimulus checks, additional unemployment benefits, and the child tax credit have been helpful, as well as the various moratoria on utility shutoffs and evictions, those are not long-term solutions to families’ economic difficulties. Unemployment continues to decline slowly – Connecticut’s rate has declined from a pandemic high of 11.2% in June, 2020 to 7.2% last month – but we have not hit the pre-pandemic unemployment rate of 3.7%. We still have a ways to go towards economic recovery.

With CSBG, CAAs conduct comprehensive community needs assessments to determine which programs, services, and resources will address the specific, unmet needs of people within the communities they serve. These needs may vary – for example, in rural versus urban areas, or in parts of the state that are experiencing disproportionate job losses. CAAs use CSBG funds for strategic planning to design and implement programs that meet those needs, while also considering organizational change, growth, and financial sustainability. CSBG funds also provide training and technical assistance to CAA staff – including tracking the services they provide – to assist with state and federal data reporting requirements. And, CAAs have thousands of partnerships with other local, state, federal, and community-based organizations, working to coordinate and improve service integration.

Notably, these federal CSBG dollars are also critical in leveraging both public and private funds. Each dollar in CSBG funds leverages \$23.45 from federal, state, local, and private resources, including the value of volunteer hours.

Impact of COVID-19 on CAA Operations

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Connecticut’s CAAs have nimbly transitioned their service delivery to ensure those facing financial struggles continue to receive vital services while taking

the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of staff and customers. CSBG funds helped make these transitions happen, by providing critical infrastructure in staffing and other resources.

A few examples:

- CAAs shifted to more Meals on Wheels home deliveries instead of congregate meals at senior centers, ensuring that homebound older adults are still able to eat nutritious meals;
- They moved to providing intake for programs like energy assistance and SNAP by phone and by mail, set up dropboxes in their parking lots for completed application forms;
- They then reopened their doors to serve people comfortable coming in, while also retaining remote options for enrollment and case management;
- They made outreach phone calls to homebound individuals to ensure their safety and address needs.

As we moved into the recovery phase of COVID-19 and the end of various moratoria, CAAs have continued to help people who are facing utility shut-offs, evictions, and excess electric costs get back on their feet. Six CAAs are contracted as Community Resource Coordinators (two each in three of the five DEMHS regions), utilizing Community Health Workers to help meet identified needs of people impacted by COVID-19. CAAs have worked in collaboration with the Department of Housing to get UniteCT services into the community, and with the Department of Public Health and local health districts to make vaccines readily available.

CSBG dollars continue to be critical resources to ensure that CAAs can provide the services and programs their communities need.

On behalf of Connecticut's Community Action Network, I would like to thank all of you, as well as Commissioner Gifford and her staff at the Department of Social Services, for your support of and advocacy for programs that serve low-income people in Connecticut and aim to help them improve their lives and communities. I am happy to discuss these funds and the work of Community Action Agencies further at your convenience.