

HOUSING

CT initiative looks for landlords' help to solve homelessness crisis

Agencies have formed a coordinated effort in Fairfield, Litchfield and New London counties called 'Welcome Home, Neighbor'



by Ginny Monk

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The New London Homeless Hospitality Center is one of the organizing service providers in a new initiative to bring in Connecticut landlords to get more people experiencing homelessness into housing. COURTESY OF ANNAH PERCH

Service providers in three Connecticut counties are launching an initiative that aims to find housing for people experiencing homelessness by offering landlords money to

cover damages, an organization to contact if they have problems with tenants and a new database to enter listings.

Organizers are in the early stages of starting the initiative in Fairfield, Litchfield and New London counties called “Welcome Home, Neighbor.” They’re hoping the program can be a starting point to address what lawmakers and advocates have said is a crisis — a growing homeless population, many of whom are unable to find a permanent place to live.

The program will have a fund set aside to offer landlords money if there is damage to their property. It’ll also help service providers stay in touch with property owners and work to resolve problems between the landlord and tenant if any arise. There will also be a database of apartment listings for landlords who have relationships with service providers and are willing to rent to people experiencing homelessness.

People are staying longer in shelters, resulting in a bottleneck, providers said. It’s putting strain on the system and in some cases means people are waiting longer for shelter beds, case worker services and housing vouchers, which help tenants pay a portion of their rent.

“It’s far more effective and humane to very quickly get people from the shelters or from their cars right into housing,” said David Rich, president and chief executive officer at The Housing Collective. “And that’s what we hope that this initiative will do is just get those numbers — which are already way too high — just get them down.”

The Housing Collective, based in Fairfield County, is one of the organizing agencies on the initiative. It will help organize Litchfield County efforts as well. The New London Homeless Hospitality Center is the organizing agency in New London County.

Both organizations are leaders in and a part of Coordinated Access Networks, a regional network of providers. Organizations from across each of the three counties will have access to the program.

The homeless population has been increasing in Connecticut for the past couple of years, following nearly a decade of decline. The last annual count of the state’s homeless population showed there were 3,015 people experiencing homelessness on a

single night in January 2023, although providers have said internal state data shows that number is an undercount.

Cathy Zall, executive director at the New London center, said the hope is that working more closely with landlords can help get people into housing faster. In some cases, people are having to give up their vouchers because they can't find a place to rent within the allotted time frame, she added.

Julie Arrington, a Danbury resident, said she experienced this firsthand when she moved back to Connecticut after living for a time in Georgia. Her employer assigned her to a caretaking job in which she lived at the patient's house. But the patient was evicted after a few months, putting Arrington on the streets as well.

She stayed in a shelter for eight months, and although she got a housing choice voucher, a lack of housing options and bad credit scores made it hard to find a place to live.

"I tried and tried," Arrington said. "I had my cousin help me, and I couldn't find nothing because of the credit. I had to use my credit cards to get my car and me up here. It was hard."

She said she would send her case workers listing after listing — she remembers once sending along 15 places she'd found. The housing choice voucher gave her 30 days to find a place to live or risk losing it. She was able to get one 30-day extension, but it was nerve-wracking, she said.

"I got on the phone and just started looking," she said. "I would call for myself, too. And I asked God to show me a way."

Eventually, housing counselors were able to help her find a place by talking directly with a potential landlord. Now she has a one-bedroom apartment in Danbury.

"A lot of landlords, they just don't want to participate," she said. "And they look at your credit score. My landlord, he likes to give second chances."

Zall said it's important to have those connections with landlords. She and Rich said those are relationships service providers have worked on for years and hope to

strengthen with the Welcome Home initiative.

“I’m convinced this is going to be huge, huge, huge to landlords, to have a property owner to have somebody to call,” Zall said.

She said that providers can help work out any problems between tenants and landlords and ask that landlords let them know if there is an issue that could lead to an eviction so providers can ensure the person doesn’t end up back on the streets.

For those who rent through Welcome Home, Neighbor, there is also a fund of up to \$2,500 beyond the security deposit to cover any damages to the property, Zall added.

The money for the initiative came from a combination of private donations, grants and federal dollars, Rich said.

“Our biggest barrier to solve homelessness, bar none, now is just the lack of any and all affordable housing,” Rich said. “So the goal is to remove barriers to our neighbors, allowing them to regain really safe, stable homes in the communities where they choose to live. And we really do see property owners and managers as key partners in addressing homelessness.”

The counties will also have a database for landlords who want to work in the program. They’ll be able to enter their apartment listings in the database so regional service providers know whether someone has already called about an apartment.

It’ll cut down on calls landlords have to field and help providers coordinate, Zall added.

She said they’re starting with people who are unhoused but have income.

“My hope is that, eventually, this will extend beyond people who have vouchers and rapid rehousing into additional populations, because we have to move people out of shelter and into housing more quickly,” she said. “It’s becoming a parking lot right now. And that is not good.”

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