

  

# COMMON GROUND

**New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services  
Hearing to Examine Implementation and Effectiveness and to Explore Best Practices of  
STEHP and NYSSHP**

**January 25, 2012**

**Common Ground Community HDFC, Inc.  
Brenda E. Rosen, Executive Director**

Hello, my name is Brenda Rosen and I am here on behalf of Common Ground Community as its Executive Director to offer input for your deliberations. Common Ground is a leading supportive housing provider to low-income and chronically homeless New Yorkers. We currently operate over 2,800 units of permanent and transitional housing across New York and are scheduled to open two additional buildings in 2012, which will increase our capacity to over 3,000 units.

I speak on behalf of Common Ground's over 360 staff members when I say we are all appreciative of the fact that the State Assembly continues to look for efficiencies in how tax dollars can best be employed to prevent and alleviate homelessness. I would highlight one very beneficial outcome to Common Ground and our constituents of the latest consolidation.

Our newest 263-unit, \$59 million Lee residence on Manhattan's Lower East Side received a NYS Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP) grant to provide essential services in the Foyer program for older youth who have aged out of the foster care system and who are at considerable risk of homelessness. The Foyer program would have been part of the previous Supported Housing for Families & Young Adults program (SHFYA) that had been nearly eliminated due to TANF cuts. Because the state had the foresight to include SHFYA as part of NYSSHP, many programs like the Foyer were prevented from being eliminated. We are extremely thankful for this funding, as it meets a critical need to help youth without family support to make a more successful transition from adolescence to a productive and independent adulthood.

The flexibility of the consolidated funding streams has helped to ensure that State funds reach a wide range of individuals and families with varying service needs that is based on a comprehensive evaluation of need rather than just targeting one specific population. Unfortunately, the current funding level is still not sufficient to support all of our projects.

Why is this important? Supportive housing has demonstrated to be an unqualified success at reducing the number of chronically homeless individuals living on the streets and in emergency shelters, and to do so at a considerably lower cost than any alternative. Key to this success has been a significant investment in capital funds from the State to construct supportive housing units. NYSSHP has been an equally vital component in making sure these buildings operate effectively. In particular, NYSSHP has enabled Common Ground to sustain the essential services onsite at our residences that have been vitally important to affecting a lasting stability by hard-to-house, chronically homeless individuals within their units. No other readily available source, either from public or private sector entities, can replace these NYSSHP resources, at least for the foreseeable future.

For the first time in our agency's 21-year history, we have received no NYSSHP dollars for new low-income and homeless units; impacting over 500 tenants across four buildings. Two projects are particularly illustrative of our concerns. One, The Domenech in Brownsville, Brooklyn serves low-income seniors, including 28 units designated for chronically homeless seniors with mental illness. Without NYSSHP funding, this site cannot afford daytime security, even though its over 70 low- and very-low income older adult tenants are living in one of New York City's most dangerous neighborhoods. Building security has demonstrated to be pivotal to Common Ground's success over the years at affecting improved long-term quality of life for tenants who have suffered from any number of frailties. Additionally, the surrounding community has expressed concerns over the population we are serving and therefore expects us to provide security.

Equally concerning is a new building opening this Spring in Rochester, called Eastman Commons, which has received no State support for its social services needs, although the building will be home to over 40 homeless adults living with a disability. In this instance, Common Ground is attempting to cobble together a minimal service package through private fundraising efforts, but the sustainability of this strategy is concerning. These two sites, in addition to two other new buildings will operate at significant losses without NYSSHP dollars. Comparatively, all projects that receive NYSSHP funding operate at break-even. The ongoing financial loss to Common Ground will be unsustainable in the long term.

I would also like to point out that the impact of insufficient NYSSHP funding is not solely a concern for Common Ground in the immediate, but also for our future ability to pursue additional supportive housing

projects as a strategy to reduce chronic homelessness statewide. Many others in our industry throughout New York share the same concern. All of us need sufficient service dollars to make our buildings function as supportive settings where we can provide the lowest cost option possible for securing the stability of special needs populations who would otherwise be homeless.

That said; I again want to express Common Ground's sincere appreciation to the people of New York State, our elected officials and to the hard working staff at the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) for their commitment to our cause. We are heartened by your deep interest in assuring that the most vulnerable in society are cared for in ways that truly promote their wellbeing. We also very much appreciate that OTDA is operating under extremely difficult economical circumstances and that they are continually looking out for the best interest of the supportive housing industry. All we ask is for your support to provide funding at the necessary levels so that we can continue to house and provide care to vulnerable New Yorkers. Thank you also for allowing Common Ground to provide testimony at this time.

Respectfully submitted by:  
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