

TESTIMONY FOR NYS ASSEMBLY HEARING 12/15/09

The governor and legislature's planned cuts of 12.5% for the SRO Support Services program will detrimentally impact our SRO housing program. Our SRO housing program is unique in the area. We serve 30 people who had been living outside on the streets for anywhere from 5-30 years and our tenants are all chronic alcoholics who are unable to maintain sobriety. Our tenants are not able to access any other shelters or housing programs because of their inability to maintain sobriety. When they were living on the streets, most of our tenants had almost daily or weekly paramedic and police contact.

HAC's SRO housing is operated as low-demand housing, which means we accept where people are at in their lives and don't require them to sober up or participate in treatment in order to be housed. However, our housing has had a tremendous impact on our tenants and has assisted them in stabilizing their lives, obtaining sobriety and medical care. Over 60% of current tenants have achieved six years of tenancy. Some of our tenants have achieved sobriety for the first time in their lives. They are re-connecting with family and actually making it to doctor and dental appointments for the first time in many years and are able to work on their health, after seeing it deteriorate from years of living outside.

SRO Support Services funding currently pays for our around the clock staff coverage, which is an absolute necessity due to the population we serve. We have one staff person on 24 hours per day, 7 days a week for 30 people (again- it's only 1 staffperson at a time on all shifts). SRO Support Services funding also helps to pay for a Case Manager, who schedules and takes tenants to all doctors, psychiatrists or dental appointments and provides advocacy at these appointments. The Case Manager also helps order tenant meds so our tenants never run out.

A 12.5% cut to this program may make it impossible for us to remain open. We have experienced other budget cuts and do not have anywhere else that we can cut. We mostly employ part-time staff because we can't even afford to pay medical insurance for our staff. We already have to raise over \$80,000/year in private donations. These cuts would devastate our program.

NYS OTDA spent \$1.5 million to build our housing program with the understanding that we operate for 25 years. We are 10 years into our contract with OTDA and these cuts will make it impossible for us to fulfill this contract, which seems shortsighted. Supportive housing is critical in saving taxpayers money and is a critical investment. It is much more expensive for individuals to sleep on the streets and end up in our jails, detoxes or hospital emergency rooms. In addition, if our program were to close many people would end up dying on our streets.

I would like to quote excerpts of an article our Executive Director, Donna DeMaria wrote in an editorial that appeared in the Times Union Perspective section on November 8th. "Do we leave those who can't or won't sober up on the streets to die? HAC has developed a humane solution... HAC believes that everyone deserves the basic necessities of life and that providing these is not enabling their addictions. This solution works. Our low demand housing, one of only a few in the country, removes the constant preoccupation of searching for food and shelter, and allows tenants to improve their daily lives. Many have dramatically improved their sobriety

and health. Having people live on the streets is far more expensive and difficult for a city to deal with. They shuttle between streets, shelters, detox facilities, jails and emergency rooms, often just for a warm bed. Cities are discovering that it is more cost effective and humane to provide them housing. A philosophy called Housing First is sweeping the country. Los Angeles County is successfully housing hard-core skid row individuals. A Boston study of Housing First tenants found a 67% reduction in their Medicaid costs. A study in the Journal of the American Medical Association states that homeless alcoholics in Housing First can stay out of jails and emergency rooms, saving taxpayers millions and that the longer participants reside in the housing, the less they drink. We have found this to be true. Each day, some tenants choose not to drink and instead stay sober. HAC tallies tenant sobriety by the day and tenants receive an annual award for their total. It is a different method of achieving the same goal. There will always be people who won't participate in treatment and who fail in more restrictive settings. Housing is the humane solution."

Now, I would like to take the opportunity to read some excerpts from letters our tenants wrote to their NYS Assemblyman and Senators about these budget cuts.

Ed wrote: "This house has helped me for the last 8 years and has helped many more people too. Please do everything you can so we can keep this house open. Many of us would be homeless with nowhere to go without this house. It's been my home for many years and has kept me off of the streets. It furnishes me with a safe and healthy environment to live in. I get food to eat. It's like having my own place. I can do my laundry, take a nice hot shower, sleep in my own bed and feel safe. I went a lot of times without a shower or safe place to sleep and these are the simple things in life that a lot of people take for granted. This place makes us feel like we are part of society and not just castaways. Thank God for this place."

Tim wrote: "This has been my home for about 10 years. Before I came to this SRO program, I was living in the woods, abandoned buildings, under arrest many times and doing drugs. I spent time in jail. The woods and vacant buildings were my home. Since moving to 393 N. Pearl St, I have not been in trouble and even hold down a small job. My disease of alcoholism does continue but my circumstances have improved. I have gone from living outside to having a warm home, friendships and food... This is all I have left and is my last chance. Please do not approve plans to cut SRO funding. I need a place to live. This program keeps me alive."

Dan wrote: "Before HAC I lived on the streets and in shelters for ten years. When I was accepted into this SRO, I was relieved not to have to spend another night on the ground, another moment worrying about shelter. I had a place to come home to, and no one could tell my time was up or there wasn't enough room. Before HAC my life was unpredictable and scary at times- you never know what can happen to you on the streets. Life is very dangerous if you don't live in a controlled environment. Living on the street, you have no motivation to better yourself because being homeless feels so permanent when it's happening. I was depressed and hopeless a lot of times because I had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Now that I live at HAC, I have been able to maintain sobriety for 2 years. I travel to see my family out of state. I have quit smoking and am able to take better care of my health by seeking medical attention which the house provides me. If this budget was cut, I would certainly end up back on the streets. I am not

a young man anymore and living on the streets would be much harder for me now. Also, I am a diabetic and HAC helps me keep my supplies in check and my diabetes in order.”

Jack wrote: I have lived at the HAC SRO for almost 11 years. Before the SRO, I bounced around for 3 years looking to find a permanent home. Lucky for me, I found out about the SRO and they were gracious enough to take me in. If I didn't have the SRO, my life would be very different. My nights would be colder and my days longer. It has been brought to my attention that serious cuts will be made in our budget at the SRO. If these cuts are put in place, it could jeopardize not only my home but my life as well.”

Finally, I would like to ask that if there really is no other way but to enact cuts, please give the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance maximum discretion to decide how to implement any cuts that are proposed. Thank you.