



COMMUNITY BUILDING

SUMMER 2025

BREAKING THE CYCLE A Single Mom's Comeback

CEO INSIGHTS

A Legislative Session of Challenges—and Hope



The gavel has come down on the Connecticut state legislative session—almost. Several bills and funding provisions still await the governor's signature. But already, this session has underscored both the challenges we face and the power of unified advocacy.

Throughout the session, nonprofits across the state worked alongside the CT Nonprofit Alliance and the CT Coalition to End Homelessness to communicate one urgent message to our legislators: **we are struggling.**

Homelessness in Connecticut has increased by **13% annually for the past two years.** At our Friendship Center soup kitchen, we've seen a **25% increase in individuals aged 65 and older** seeking meals and food assistance—a clear sign of a growing crisis among our aging population.

Despite rising need, state funding for essential human services has not kept pace with inflation. Compared to 2007, we're operating with **30% less purchasing power,** even as the demand for services has grown. This has made it increasingly difficult to offer competitive wages, retain staff, and meet the needs of the communities we serve.

But there is hope.

This session, the legislature passed a bill to address equitable compensation for

MONIQUE, A SINGLE MOTHER, WAS THRUST into crisis when an eviction left her and her 8-year-old daughter, Layla, without a home. With nowhere else to turn, they moved in with relatives—but the temporary arrangement quickly deteriorated as Monique's struggle with substance addiction created instability.

Eventually, they were asked to leave, once again facing the uncertainty of the streets. Desperate to find a safe and stable place for her daughter, Monique reached out to the Greater Hartford Diversion team through **Mercy Housing.** That call for help led them to a family shelter, and ultimately, to a new beginning at the Sue Ann Shay Apartments — a permanent supportive housing community operated by **My Sisters' Place,** where they could finally begin to rebuild their lives.

There, Monique found more than just housing. Through the team at My Sisters' Place she received case management, mental health counseling, and substance use support, while Layla benefited from educational and resilience-building programs. With stability under her feet, Monique earned her GED, took computer courses, and began her job search — all while staying committed to her recovery.

When she felt ready to move on, Monique expressed her gratitude and chose to free up space for another family in need of support from My Sisters' Place. With the help of the Greater Hartford Coordinated Access Network, she secured a special housing voucher and moved with Layla into a two-bedroom apartment in East Hartford. Today, both are thriving and enjoying their new chapter.



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state-contracted human services providers. This critical legislation aims to correct wage stagnation and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the nonprofit workforce in Connecticut. As of this writing, the bill is awaiting the governor's signature.

We are deeply grateful to all of you—our supporters, advocates, and community partners. Your voice, your belief in our mission, and your commitment to a more just and caring Connecticut make our work possible every day.

Together, we're making a lasting impact.

Kara A. Capone
Chief Executive Officer

Donor Makes Book Fair Possible

The 80 children who are part of the My Sisters' Place Youth Program enjoyed a wonderful opportunity to choose their favorite books at a special book fair held for them thanks to the generosity of a caring local family.

Ann and Mitch Cohen made the donation from funding from the Jeffrey S. Cohen Library for Young Stars in memory of their son.

MSP Youth Program Coordinator Kristen Weiber used those funds to select and purchase a wide array of more than 60 books for ages newborn to 18 to prep for the book fair held in the Spring.

"We were so excited when we received word of the funding," commented Weiber. "We are always looking for ways to promote learning and reading, and to be able to purchase books specifically for our kids' interest was such a godsend. We are so grateful to the Cohen's."



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A Case for Support: Why You Are So Vital to Our Mission

MONIQUE'S STORY IS A POWERFUL reminder of the impact you make. Thanks to your support, she and her young daughter—and so many others—have found safety, stability, and a path to independence through Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place. Because of you, we're ending homelessness one family at a time.

Help us finish our fiscal year strong. Please consider making a gift to our Spring Appeal by June 30. Scan the QR codes to make an online donation on our secure portals or you can send a check made payable to either Mercy Housing or My Sisters' Place by using the enclosed remit envelope.



DONATE TO MERCY



DONATE TO MSP

Thank you for standing with us. Your support truly changes lives.



OUR BOARD, OUR MISSION: Why They Serve

We could not carry out the vital work of supporting the homeless in our community without the steadfast commitment of our dedicated Board of Directors. It is our privilege to begin introducing you to these remarkable individuals, highlighting a different Board member each quarter. To launch this series, it is only fitting that we start with:

DIANE BENGSTON, Board chair

Diane has devoted more than a decade to serving both Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place, beginning as a dedicated volunteer before being elected to the Board of Directors and ultimately rising to the role of Board Chair. Diane's journey with us began while she was building an impressive 46-year career at Travelers, ultimately retiring as Executive Vice President in 2020. Alongside her professional accomplishments, she found deep fulfillment in volunteering—a passion that led her to serve both My Sisters' Place and Mercy Housing for over a decade.

Today, she balances her time between cherishing moments with her three grandchildren and championing the work of our organizations. As Diane's tenure as Board Chair concludes in June, her commitment to our mission remains steadfast.

"I have truly enjoyed my time working with Community Housing Advocates (CHA—the administrative umbrella for Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place), and I love serving meals at the Friendship Center. While my Board term may be ending, I look forward to staying active on committees and, of course, continuing to serve meals," she shared.

When asked why she continues to give her time and resources, Diane's answer is simple and heartfelt:

"I give to CHA because everyone deserves food, personal attention, and a safe place to live. It's deeply important to me to give back—and what could be more meaningful than helping people build a better, safer life?"

We are profoundly grateful for Diane's leadership and service as a member of our Board of Directors and as our Board Chair. Even as she steps down from her current role, we are inspired.

DONOR spotlight

DID YOU KNOW THAT EVERY MONTH, we have the incredible privilege of filling two vans full of food and essential supplies from the Midwest Food Bank of New England?

Located in Manchester, this faith-based nonprofit opened its doors in New England in 2021 and has since become a lifeline for Mercy Housing, My Sisters' Place, and more than 160 other organizations across the region. Their generosity fuels our mission—and fills countless plates and hearts.

Each month, Chef Arthur Rooks, who leads the team at Mercy's Friendship Center soup kitchen, eagerly steps into the food bank's warehouse, searching for nutritious ingredients to turn into warm, nourishing meals.

"What we're able to get from Midwest Food Bank supplements what we have to buy, and it's a much-needed cost savings," Chef Arthur explains. "It helps us serve more people, more often, with better food."



But the support doesn't stop at food. Midwest Food Bank also provides other items including clothing, shoes, cleaning supplies, and toys—all of which are shared with clients and residents across all Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place sites. These donations offer not just practical support, but dignity, comfort, and joy.

We are profoundly grateful for our partnership with the Midwest Food Bank as they walk alongside us—helping us to feed hope, one van at a time.

CHA WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS

COMMUNITY HOUSING ADVOCATES (CHA), the parent organization of both Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place, is pleased to announce the addition of three new members of CHA's Board of Directors.



Hartford native **MARY FLINT** is no stranger to our organization. She already plays a key role on CHA's Finance and Investment Committees and brings valuable insight and experience to those committees. With over 20 years at Travelers Insurance, where she is a Senior Accountant, and as a licensed realtor with Vision Real Estate, Mary offers a unique perspective on the housing challenges our community faces. Her lived experience and professional insight make her a valued leader and champion of our mission.



KAREN MATHESON brings decades of leadership in finance, investments, and strategy from her 25+ year career at CIGNA and Lincoln Financial. A longtime supporter, Karen first joined the My Sisters' Place Board in 2003, later serving as Treasurer and offering key insight during the formation of CHA. Even in retirement, she remains a vital voice on the Finance Committee, and we're thrilled to welcome her back as an incoming Board member.



IRENE POINELLI brings a blend of nonprofit passion and corporate leadership to CHA's Board of Directors. A member of our Development and Hope & Home committees, Irene has already made a meaningful impact. With 14 years at Planned Parenthood and later as National VP of Sales in the hearing aid industry, she brings experience and strategic insight. Now retired, Irene devotes her time to her new grandson Logan Michael, her rescue dog Maxx and to causes she cares about, continuing her lifelong commitment to making a difference.

We are honored to have Mary, Karen and Irene join our Board of Directors and are confident their expertise will greatly enhance our mission.

A PLACE TO HEAL, A PATH FORWARD

The Haven Offers Hope to Young Adults

Imagine growing up in foster care—moving from home to home, never feeling truly grounded—and then turning 18 only to find yourself aged out of the system, alone, with nowhere to go. For many young adults in Connecticut, this is a harsh reality. But thanks to The Haven, it doesn't have to be the end of the story—it can be the beginning of a new one. Operated by Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation, The Haven is a round-the-clock, supportive residential program for young adults ages 18 to 25 who are transitioning out of foster care and other unstable living situations. These young people are referred through the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Young Adult Services Program and often arrive carrying the heavy burden of trauma, instability, and uncertainty.



At The Haven, they find more than just a place to sleep—they find a home, a community, and a second chance.

During their typical two-year stay, residents receive a wide range of wraparound services designed to build the confidence, skills, and support systems they need to thrive on their own. These include:

- ✓ **PERSONALIZED CASE MANAGEMENT**
- ✓ **COORDINATION WITH OUTPATIENT MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES**
- ✓ **SKILL-BUILDING INSTRUCTION FOR DAILY LIVING**
- ✓ **ONSITE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL GROUPS**
- ✓ **EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL SUPPORT**
- ✓ **FINANCIAL LITERACY AND MONEY MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

Located in a former convent, The Haven offers a warm, home-like environment where up to ten young adults can live together. Each resident has a bedroom and shares access to communal spaces like a large kitchen and living room—places to relax, cook, share meals, and begin to form positive, healing relationships.

For many, The Haven is the first place they've felt truly safe. It gives them time to heal, the tools to grow, and the support to step into adulthood with hope and purpose. Because every young person deserves more than just a place to stay. They deserve a place to belong—and a real shot at a brighter future.

IMPACTING LIVES

Affecting Change



FROM FEAR TO COURAGE Tammy Leaves The Haven

Before I came here, I was living in fear. Now I am the bravest person I know. I am just so proud of the person I am today.

—TAMMY

In October 2022, a frightened young woman in her early twenties arrived at The Haven's doorstep, after being discharged from Connecticut Valley Hospital, where she had received treatment following a severe mental health crisis. Tammy was alone, uncertain about her future, and struggling to find stability.

"Tammy was soft-spoken and scared, with very little confidence," recalls Susana Villalobos, Director of Youth Services at The Haven. "But even then, we could see her resilience."

Over the months that followed, Tammy's transformation was nothing short of inspiring. With round-the-clock support from The Haven's dedicated staff, she began to rebuild her life—step by step, goal by goal. She secured a job, began saving, and enrolled at Capital Community College, where she earned straight A's her first semester.

On June 3rd, Tammy took the brave leap to leave The Haven and move into her own apartment through a lower-level care program—an important milestone on her journey to full independence.

"I really love the staff at The Haven," Tammy shared. "They were always there for me—no matter what I was going through. I'll miss them so much, but I'm ready for this."

Tammy's next goals? Earning her associate degree, becoming a certified medical assistant, and one day, living fully independently—with no program supports.

"We are so incredibly proud of Tammy," says Villalobos. "Watching her grow and thrive—that's exactly why we do this work." Tammy's story is a powerful reminder that with the right support, healing is possible—and so is a future filled with hope, courage, and possibility.



- 1** Volunteers from Arbella Insurance cleaned and organized the Book Room at My Sisters' Place.
- 2** My Sisters' Place's Youth Program held a family Easter celebration. Volunteers included Kara Obermeier (far right) and husband Bryan along with members of the Junior League of Hartford.
- 3-4** The UConn Panhellenic Council and students from the Ethel Walker School worked together to clean and organize Mercy Housing's food and clothing pantries.
- 5** United Healthcare's Volunteer Council donated cleaning supplies and other household goods to My Sisters' Place.
- 6** Larissa Regan and Brooke Lewis (2nd and 3rd from the left) from UConn's School of Social Work donated over 100 care kits to Mercy Housing's Diversion and Outreach program.

- 7** Travelers volunteers assembled 200 hygiene kits for the families of My Sisters' Place.
- 8** First Church West Hartford's annual "Do Good Friday" event included making lunches and Easter cards for visitors to the Friendship Center.
- 9** Leslie Velez (left) from Connecticut Children's Medical Center and the Bernice Bags Foundation supported My Sisters' Place's Youth Program's annual Mother's Day Pop-Up Shop.
- 10** The State of Connecticut Judicial Marshals donate essential items for Friendship Center visitors every month.
- 11-12** Mercy Housing was one of the beneficiaries of the Junior League of Hartford's 24-hour Volunteer-a-Thon.

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CONNECT WITH US!



Due to space limitations we are unable to include photos of all the great support we receive. However, we are grateful to you all nonetheless.

HONORING OUR *Major Donors*

We were honored to gather with some of our most generous supporters during a special reception held at the Governor's Residence this spring. This meaningful event gave our Board of Directors and staff the opportunity to personally thank the major donors who play a vital role in sustaining the missions of both Mercy Housing and My Sisters' Place.

"We owe a special debt of gratitude to this remarkable group of individuals, whose generous contributions allow us to continue the important work we do," said Kara Capone, CEO of Community Housing Advocates, the administrative umbrella for both organizations.

The Governor's Residence provided a beautiful and fitting setting for the evening. Not only is it an elegant and historic venue, but it is also generously offered free of charge to nonprofit organizations—a true reflection of the spirit of community support that made this event possible.



BREAKING BARRIERS IN MIDDLETOWN: PSH Team Sets New Standard for Housing Success



MERCY'S MIDDLETOWN PSH TEAM:

Jacqueline Pawlak,
Team Supervisor and
Ryan Erickson, CSW II

Mercy's Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) team in Middletown is redefining what's possible when it comes to tackling homelessness. With unwavering dedication and a drive to serve, the team has recently helped three individuals move out of shelters and into safe, permanent homes—a life-changing milestone for each person.

One especially powerful success story: a client facing multiple barriers secured her own apartment in just twelve days. In the midst of a statewide housing crisis, this rapid placement is nothing short of extraordinary.

Thanks to the team's persistence, compassion, and belief in the power of second chances, lives are being transformed across Middlesex County. We're deeply grateful for their tireless work to bring hope, stability, and independence to those who need it most.