



Assembly Homeland Security and State Preparedness Committee
Testimony in support of A815
March 3, 2016

Thank you Chairwoman Quijano and members of the Homeland Security and State Preparedness Committee for the opportunity to speak about the Code Blue legislation, A815, before you today. I'm Sharon Barker and I am the Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey (the Network). The Network is the statewide association of more than 250 housing and community development corporations, individuals and other organizations that support the creation of housing, economic opportunities, and strong communities throughout the State.

Thank you to Assemblymen Land and Andrzejczak for sponsoring this much needed bill. The Network heard from our members that the level of services provided throughout the State when the weather is frigid varies widely. The Network did a survey of New Jersey Counties on what programs they had in place to help people living on the streets get to a warm place when the outdoor temperatures get dangerously low and we were astounded to find that the phone numbers that are provided as the contact couldn't provide us with locations in their county to turn to for assistance and warmth.

We have all heard the horrible news of New Jersey homeless who have died because of the cold weather. There is no reason for anyone to be left out in the cold. It is inhumane for us to turn our backs on those that don't have shelter or heat.

When we made calls to the 21 counties, we were astounded to learn that some County officials or representatives, who were publicly referenced as code blue resources, had no idea what Code Blue even was. We were put into voicemail, transferred between departments, put on hold for incredibly long periods of time, asked repeatedly to explain what we were asking for, and in the majority of cases we were just referred to another number or agency including NJ211, which is only as good as the information they receive.

We couldn't believe it when one official said, "we don't have a homeless problem in this county." What we found was that programs throughout the state range from denial to full-fledged programs that address various needs with clear programs and locations identified.

Because of the wide disparities in the way different Counties run their Code Blue program, we urge you to pass legislation that includes clear guidelines as to when a Code Blue should be called, although some counties may choose to call sooner, and in how to find the information needed when a person is in crisis. Some Counties do an excellent job. You'll hear from my colleagues about the excellent programs in two of the counties - Burlington and Cumberland.

We truly appreciate your consideration of this bill and your efforts to provide a plan for addressing the needs of our vulnerable populations when they are in crisis. Thank you for your time today and please know that the Network is happy to work with you to assist in putting this plan in place.