



Summary Report and Recommendations of the City of New London Homelessness Working Group

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Thanks are also offered to those individuals who took the time to meet with the Homelessness Working Group over the course of this examination. Without the information provided by those from the following organizations, the recommendations provided herein could not have been made.

Lawrence & Memorial Hospital
Radisson Hotel
New London Police Department
New London Fire Department
The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments
The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness
Southeastern Mental Health Authority
The St. James Homeless Shelter Staff and Residents
St. James Church
New London Planning and Zoning Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Homelessness Working Group was created by an action of the New London City Council to examine issues relative to the homeless situation in the City of New London. A nine member group was formed consisting of members of the New London City Council Committee on Public Welfare, three persons representing St. James Church and Homeless Hospitality Center, a person representing the business committee, and two interested citizens. Over the course of ten weeks, group members provided opinions and details regarding homelessness, deliberated divergent points of view, and met with several organizations in order to bring recommendations to the New London City Council.

The Homelessness Working Group believes that homelessness is a problem with no easy or immediate solution and that until such a solution is found, homeless shelters are necessary. The Homelessness Working Group feels, however, that homeless shelters should only be located in areas which minimize adverse effects to surrounding environs and for that reason, such facilities should be located outside of the New London Central Business District. The Homelessness Working Group further believes that issues associated with homeless shelters should ultimately be governed by the City of New London Planning and Zoning Commission and not New London City Council action. The Homelessness Working Group also feels that until such oversight is developed, strict policies should be in place to encourage those suffering from alcohol and drug abuse to get the help they need.

Therefore, although other recommendations are included herein, the Homelessness Working Group proposes the following primary recommendations: 1) that the New London Homeless Hospitality Center be supported in an effort to relocate the homeless shelter currently sited at St. James Church, to a new location outside of the New London Central Business District; 2) that the City of New London Planning and Zoning Commission begin the process of regulation changes needed to permit and oversee homeless shelters; 3) that until the operation of homeless shelters is governed by planning and zoning regulations, the current policy of testing *all* individuals entering the St. James Homeless Shelter for blood alcohol content be rescinded, and that the New London Homeless Hospitality Center consider implementing a revised interim policy which limits the number of times those under the influence of drugs or alcohol are allowed access to homeless facilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Homelessness Working Group (HWG) was established by an action of the New London City Council (NLCC). Members of the HWG were selected because they represented interested parties relative to the homeless issue and because they held strong opinions on both sides of the homelessness debate. The nine-member HWG was comprised of representatives of the NLCC, the New London Homeless Hospitality Center (HHC), St. James Church, the business community, and residents at large.

The following report is the result of over a dozen meetings held by members of the HWG which took place between July and September, 2008. Meetings were held in order to identify preliminary points of view, debate aspects of the homelessness issue, and to solicit input from individuals and organizations that are directly involved with some aspect of homelessness. Semi-weekly “regular” meetings, as well as numerous “outreach” meetings, were held to update group members on progress and to listen to the comments of concerned parties. Meetings were open to the public although public input was limited when time constraints required so.

At the beginning of the group’s work, a list of questions was created to direct discussions toward aspects of the homelessness issue which have the greatest affect on New London. Clearly not every question related to the homelessness could be asked and answered in the short time the HWG had to work, but a focus was established to provide some recommendations addressing the immediate concerns of the NLCC.

The efforts of the HWG were never intended to compare with those made by the numerous individuals, organizations, and commissions that preceded it. The group was challenged to provide, by the end of September, 2008, recommendations relative to homelessness in New London in general, and to the operation of the shelter at St. James Church, in particular. Included herein is an accounting of the group’s work, deliberations, and recommendations for answering that challenge.

2. BACKGROUND

Homelessness has been evident in New London for decades. The first of New London’s two homeless shelters, Covenant Shelter, opened in 1982. In response to an evidently growing problem, the second, St. James Homeless Shelter (SJHS), opened in December, 2005, under the management of the HHC on a temporary, emergency basis to shelter homeless individuals during the winter months. Prior to that time, many homeless were spending winter nights at the New London Police Station. The SJHS was established under the City’s police powers authority since no regulations allowing for homeless shelters in the City existed. The Covenant Shelter was and is in operation as a pre-existing, non-conforming use.

The SJHS effectively became a year-round shelter in Spring, 2007, when the NLCC voted to allow operation through the summer months as well as winter. This allowance was given with the understanding that the management of the shelter return to the NLCC in April, 2008, to make a request for continued operation. By June, 2008, no such request was received and the NLCC voted to rescind the authorization of the SJHS to operate within the City’s police powers.

After reconsideration during its July 7, 2008, regular meeting, the NLCC voted to allow the SJHS to continue operation provided that the facility become a “dry” (i.e., exclusive of intoxicated individuals)

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shelter. The term dry would be defined at a subsequent NLCC meeting to mean anyone having a blood alcohol content (BAC) below 0.08 as measured by a breathalyzer. In the same July 7 action, the NLCC established a working group for the purpose of providing a recommendation regarding homelessness in New London and the operation of the SJHS. The motion is included here in its entirety:

The motion as amended carried 7-0. Pursuant to the July 3, 2008 request from the New London Homeless Hospitality Center, the New London City Council modifies its policy to allow for the continued operation of the New London Homeless Hospitality Center's shelter at St. James Church through the remainder of the summer and fall of 2008, with continuing authorization to operate from November 1 to April 30, 2009, and that effective July 31, 2008, the shelter become a dry shelter. And, further the City Council agrees to the formation of a working committee consisting of the members of the Council Committee on Public Welfare, three persons representing St. James Church and Homeless Hospitality Center, a person representing the business committee, and two interested citizens, and that they report back to Council by September 30, 2008 with a report and their recommendation.

On July 14, 2008, the NLCC Public Welfare Committee met and set up the HWG. At its first meeting on July 21, 2008, the HWG discussed members' initial viewpoints and identified a list of organizations with which it should meet. The August 4, 2008, meeting of the HWG included development of a list of questions it felt it should answer as part of its focus and assigned responsibilities to members for arranging meetings with stake-holding organizations. At the August 11, 2008, meeting, updates were provided regarding outreach efforts, a potential interim SJHS policy was discussed, and a consensus was reached regarding a list of questions to answer for the final report. A combined HWG and outreach meeting was held on August 25, 2008, with representatives from The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and the Southeastern Mental Health Authority. At the September 8, 2008 HWG meeting, the first half of the questions which the group agreed to address were answered based on information received to that date as a result of the preceding HWG and outreach meetings. The second half of the questions were answered at the September 15, 2008, HWG meeting.

In addition to the aforementioned meetings, members of the HWG also participated in a series of outreach meetings. Between August 5, 2008, and September 16, 2008, members of the HWG met with representatives from Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, the Radisson Hotel, the New London Police Department, the New London Fire Department, The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, the St. James Homeless Shelter Staff and Residents, St. James Church, and the New London Planning and Zoning Commission. Each of these meetings provided valuable insight and helped members deliberate thoughtfully on the recommendations included in this report.

3. CONCERNS / QUESTIONS

The concerns that members initially brought to the HWG were as divergent as their backgrounds. While some members felt the SJHS should be closed, others felt the City Council had no business in making any recommendations relative to its operation. This section is intended to relay the thoughts which members brought to the HWG as well as identify consensus positions which the group reached as a result of their efforts.

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Some members' initial concerns involved the belief that some homeless individuals were taking advantage of the system provided for them. This feeling was directed at homeless individuals who were known to abuse alcohol or drugs (or both) on a daily basis with no intention of getting help. One member pointed out the publication of two survey questions in the Southeastern Connecticut Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, Reference (A), to exemplify this argument. One question asked of 177 individuals (103 of which were homeless) was to identify the characteristics of homelessness. Tied for the *most* responses was "Substance Abuse." The other question asked of 103 homeless individuals was to identify unmet service needs. Of twelve possible answers, the *least* chosen was "Detox." Another member felt that an individual must "reach bottom" before seeking help and that providing for them with no questions asked prevented them from getting the impetus they needed to better their lives. Yet another member felt that the SJHS could be a "better neighbor" by quickly attending to any inappropriate behavior on the part of their guests and implementing stricter rules. Another member felt the SJHS was never intended to become a year-round shelter and that it should remain a temporary, emergency shelter as it was initially intended.

Other members of the group pointed out that homelessness is not going away, nor would homeless individuals if the shelter were to cease operations. Another member believed that the homeless population is rising and that the need for shelter is greater now more than ever. Yet another member felt that until there is a solution to homelessness, homeless individuals are "here to stay" and that fact should be incorporated into a discussion of economic development. The statement was made to put forward the notion that homelessness can coexist with everything people know New London can be.

Clearly the statements made by members of the HWG were diverse. However, at the time of writing of this report, one member on the initially "con" homeless shelter side of the argument was advocating for a larger homeless shelter and the reestablishment of the City's Social Services department. Conversely, one member on the initially "pro" homeless shelter side of the argument was advocating for strict adherence to laws for those drinking in public as an effort to deter such behavior. Observations such as these suggest that the meetings and discussions held during the term of the HWG provided members with a deeper understanding of the homeless issue. Although total member agreement on every topic discussed remained elusive, it was this understanding that allowed members to see both sides of the argument and reach a consensus on many aspects.

In addition to the concerns brought forth by members of the HWG, many other concerns were identified by individuals whose input the group solicited during outreach meetings. As with the HWG itself, concerns expressed by participants of the outreach meetings ranged from the affect homeless individuals have on tourism and economic development in New London, to questioning the authority of the NLCC to enact any policies at the SJHS. Specifically, some outreach meeting participants believed there is a need for a homeless shelter such as the SJHS, but not where it is presently located as it detracts from downtown businesses. Other participants believe that the shelter, together with the other service organizations (e.g., the Covenant Shelter, the New London Community Meal Center, the Community Health Center, etc.) attract homeless individuals to New London at an ever-increasing rate and that when the SJHS became a year-round shelter, more problems resulted. Some other outreach meeting participants pointed out the strain that homeless individuals put on the City's emergency services and that the attention given to homeless individuals by New London's emergency services is disproportionate to other responsibilities, and reduces the availability of crews for other emergencies.

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Other statements from outreach meeting participants suggested that the NLCC's action to require breathalyzer testing of homeless individuals would exacerbate existing problems with intoxicated people on the streets of New London. In particular, Lawrence & Memorial Hospital indicated that the availability of a "wet" shelter reduces strain on their emergency room. Some other comments were meant to point out to the HWG that individuals habitually under the influence of alcohol or drugs actually represent a small percentage of the homeless population and that policies directed at that small group should be well thought out so as not to affect those not in that category. Other participants believed that authority for overseeing the operation of homeless shelters should eventually rest with the Planning and Zoning Commission and not the NLCC.

With their own concerns in mind, as well as those identified during outreach meetings, the HWG, during their deliberations, identified and answered several questions regarding homelessness and in particular its effect on the City of New London. The list of those questions, together with supporting rationale for asking them, is included below:

1. Does the HWG recommend that New London be the location for an additional or larger year-round shelter for the homeless?

In this question, the term "additional" is referring to the SJHS. The question asks whether or not HWG members feel the SJHS should be a permanent facility (but not necessarily at St. James) or if it should be a temporary, emergency shelter as originally intended. The issue of a larger shelter is raised since the SJHS currently has only the capacity to accept approximately 50 homeless individuals per night; this when the homeless population in New London as been estimated at around 100.

2. Does the HWG recommend that New London be the location for a year-round shelter for only those from New London? If so, how should such a shelter be funded?

Other homeless shelters in Connecticut exclude individuals from entry if they are not originally from the municipality in which the shelter is located. These shelters, however, are directly funded by those municipalities. Currently, New London does not make direct contributions to either the Covenant Shelter or the SJHS but supports both by providing substantial Police and Fire/Ambulance emergency services. This question is also being asked since according to the New London HHC Update for the New London City Council, Reference (B), only 38% of the homeless individuals utilizing the HHC identify New London as their "town of origin."

3. What does the HWG recommend regarding zoning regulations and their effect on the St. James Church?

Since New London currently has no zoning regulations providing for homeless shelters, operation of the SJHS is falling under the City's police powers (the Covenant Shelter operates within a pre-existing, non-conforming use). This question was asked to determine whether or not the HWG members felt that oversight of homeless shelter should fall within the responsibility of the City Council or the Planning and Zoning Commission as it does in other municipalities.

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4. Does the HWG recommend a location for a new, year-round homeless shelter?

The SJHS's current location places it with the City of New London's Central Business District (CBD) adjacent to the City's only downtown hotel and a short distance from many downtown businesses and two elementary schools. This question was asked to identify the HWG's feelings regarding the relocation of the shelter currently at St. James Church.

5. What does the HWG recommend regarding the question of a "wet vs. dry" shelter?

At the same time the HWG was established, the NLCC voted to require the SJHS to become a "dry" shelter. Prior to that point, the staff at the SJHS would admit any individual, regardless of the level at which they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, provided that they were not a threat to themselves or others, and provided that they did not *possess* alcohol or drugs. A "wet" policy was considered by some members of the HWG to be enabling homeless individuals with a alcohol or drug problem to continue their habit without intervention.

6. Does the HWG recommend solicitation by New London of shelter financial support from surrounding communities and the State?

According to Reference (B), 62% of the homeless individuals utilizing the HHC identified towns other than New London as their "town of origin." Although New London does not directly provide financial support for the SJHS, it does provide emergency services for it and since that support is given, statistically speaking, to a majority of individuals from other towns, the HWG was asked to comment on whether or not New London should solicit financial support from those towns.

7. What does the HWG recommend regarding the homeless population and its sub-categories?

There are many reasons for homelessness. Some include but are not limited to: 1) individuals who are temporarily displaced due to the loss of a home or job, 2) individuals who are mentally or physically disabled, 3) individuals who abuse alcohol or drugs and who are established or seeking enrollment in recovery programs, and 4) individuals who abuse alcohol or drugs and who are *not* established or seeking enrollment in any recovery program. The common perspective of the HWG is that the overall homeless population is growing and that each category needs to be handled differently. This sentiment was echoed during outreach meeting discussions. This question is being asked to determine whether or not the HWG members felt that the population level of each category should be tracked to identify growth trends in time to react to them. For example, in the current economy, growth is expected among individuals falling under the Category 1. However, growth in Category 4 should serve as an alarm to service providers.

8. What is the HWG recommendation regarding those individuals not currently in a homeless shelter and their effect on New London?

Despite the availability of the shelter, homeless individuals choose to remain regularly outdoors overnight. In addition, the SJHS is only open between 7:00 PM and 7:00 AM

meaning that during the day the group that stays at the shelter, as well as those who do not, typically wander the City. Homeless individuals have been cited for public disturbance and arrested for disorderly conduct and public indecency. Reports have also been made regarding homeless individuals fighting among themselves and stealing from residents within the City. The HWG was asked to consider this question since the effect of homeless individuals in New London is not solely the product of the SJHS activities.

HWG members' concerns focused primarily on issues relative to the SJHS, but included discussions on how best to handle the overall homelessness issue in New London.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Development of the HWG's recommendations began with answering the questions identified in Section 3 of this report. Answers were based on discussions held in the HWG regular meetings, input from participants provided at outreach meetings, and on member viewpoints which tended to evolve during the course of the HWG's effort. Although not every member of the group agreed with the answers provided for each question, a consensus was reached for most every question and is provided below:

Question #1 (Does the HWG recommend that New London be the location for an additional or larger year-round shelter for the homeless?)

The majority of the HWG believes that closing the SJHS now would be ill-advised considering the number of people who have come to rely on its services and on the services of nearby providers. Members of the HWG feel that the HHC should increase their efforts toward finding a new location for their homeless shelter and that during that search, the shelter at St. James Church should be allowed to remain open. While some disagree, the HWG members also generally feel that a year-round shelter (as opposed to a temporary one) is needed.

Question #2 (Does the HWG recommend that New London be the location for a year-round shelter for only those from New London? If so, how should such a shelter be funded?)

While some HWG members feel that New London homeless shelters should only allow those from New London, others feel that the shelters should not exclude individuals from other communities. One reason for the latter opinion stemmed from the belief that identifying the true origin of many homeless would be not be possible. Another point made was that if such a position were to be taken, New London taxpayers would be required to fund the shelter which is currently being predominantly funded from outside sources.

Question #3 (What does the HWG recommend regarding zoning regulations and their effect on the St. James Church?)

The HWG believes that ultimately the NLCC should not be providing the oversight for homeless shelters in New London. The group feels that such oversight should fall under the purview of the New London Planning and Zoning Commission and that the Commission should draft the necessary regulations to allow for and monitor homeless shelters in the City, but outside the CDB.

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Question #4 (Does the HWG recommend a location for a new, year-round homeless shelter?)

While some members disagreed, many of the HWG members believed that the Martin Center would be a good choice for a homeless shelter. Reasons given for this opinion included the idea that the Martin Center is currently underutilized, has sufficient capacity, and is outside the CBD. Dissenting members believe the Martin Center is already being used by a number of organizations and is too close to the Jennings Elementary School and the New London Senior Center. Considering that the HHC is currently investigating other locations, the HWG did not officially recommend any new site.

Question #5 (What does the HWG recommend regarding the question of a “wet vs. dry” shelter?)

Although there was disagreement relative to the use of a breathalyzer at the SJHS, members of the HWG believe that the current requirement for testing BAC levels of guests should be suspended during the winter months. Many members went further to say that excluding those under the influence of alcohol or drugs should not take place at any time since the SJHS should be considered a gateway for bringing individuals toward recovery. This last point was not disputed, but some members still feel that the practice of unchallenged acceptance of certain behavior did not do enough to force intervention. The HWG, therefore, recommended implementation of a revised interim policy (see below).

Question #6 (Does the HWG recommend solicitation by New London of shelter financial support from surrounding communities and the State?)

Many members of the HWG feel that bills should be sent to municipalities identified by homeless individuals as their town of origin in order to offset the costs of operating the shelter. However, since the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECCOG) has initiated an effort to solicit financial support from area municipalities, the HWG agreed that additional solicitation is not required at this time and that the SECCOG should be given an opportunity to succeed first. Some group members felt, though, that if a town declined to provide financial support, then they should be billed if and when a homeless person from their town is serviced in New London.

Question #7 (What does the HWG recommend regarding the homeless population and its sub-categories?)

The HWG agrees that many different circumstances cause homelessness. They also agree that some circumstances (temporary displacements) are more readily dealt with than others (mental illness or substance abuse). For this reason, the HWG feels that the homeless population in New London, and the reasons for that homelessness, should be monitored in an effort to provide an “early warning system” for any growing problem.

Question #8 (What is the HWG recommendation regarding those individuals not currently in a homeless shelter and their effect on New London?)

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The HWG believes that intervention in the lives of homeless individuals should not be limited to the HHC or the SJHS. The group feels that more scrutiny must be placed on those individuals who during the day create disturbances within the City that results in a negative perception of New London. In order to address this, the HWG feels that the staff of the HHC and the SJHS should intensify their practice of quickly identifying the reasons why newly arriving individuals are homeless and returning them to their place of origin. The group also feels that intervention practices currently implemented in other municipalities should be investigated. One such practice could involve allowing police officers to bring intoxicated or “high” homeless individuals, subject to arrest, to the HHC instead of jail on the condition that the HHC staff make their best effort to compel those individuals toward a plan of recovery.

Having identified the thought process used and questions considered by the HWG during its deliberations, the following recommendations are provided as a result of consensus when reached. Although all the recommendations proposed are considered important, the first three should be viewed as primary recommendations of the HWG that the NLCC should earnestly consider implementing.

- I. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that the New London Homeless Hospitality Center be supported in an effort to relocate the homeless shelter currently sited at St. James Church, to a new location outside of the New London Central Business District.
- II. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that the City of New London Planning and Zoning Commission begin the process of regulation changes needed to permit and oversee homeless shelters, using as a guide model regulations from other municipalities as provided in Reference (C).
- III. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that until the operation of homeless shelters is governed by planning and zoning regulations, the current policy of testing *all* individuals entering the SJHS for blood alcohol content be rescinded, and that the New London Homeless Hospitality Center consider implementing the following policy:
 1. In judging impairment, the staff will consider the immediate and anticipated overnight well-being of the individual and look for specific behavioral evidence that the individual cannot make independent use of the shelter.
 - a. Individuals who are obviously seriously impaired by the use of alcohol or drugs will not be accepted and will be immediately transferred to the Lawrence & Memorial Hospital Emergency Room via ambulance. In addition, an individual whose behavior constitutes a threat to his/her own, or others, safety, or who causes physical damage in or around the shelter, will be referred to the police.
 - b. Individuals who are obviously, but not seriously, impaired by the use of alcohol or drugs will be accepted but excluded from the regular sleeping areas of the shelter.
 2. If obviously, but not seriously, impaired persons meet the long-standing shelter policy, namely,
 - a. they are not a threat to his/her own, or others, health or safety;
 - b. they do not cause physical damage in or around the shelter;

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- c. they do not possess, or attempt to use, either alcohol or drugs in or around the shelter,
they will be allowed to remain overnight in a designated area apart from the normal sleeping areas. Throughout the night, the staff will monitor those in the designated area for signs of mental or physical deterioration.
 - 3. Anyone seeking entry to the shelter who shows signs of intoxication (unsteady walking, slurred speech, inability to perform basic manual tasks, difficulty in communications, etc.) must have their blood alcohol content (BAC) measured by use of a breathalyzer. Anyone with a BAC level above 0.12, and having first satisfied the requirements of paragraph 1, will be allowed to remain overnight although in a designated area apart from the normal sleeping areas.
 - 4. Individuals meeting any of the criteria in paragraphs 1, 2 or 3, will be required to meet with an appropriate professional the following morning. The shelter has begun discussions with the Southeastern Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. and Eastern Region Service Council to secure their assistance. If this level of intervention is not sufficient to support the individual's ability to function independently in the shelter after two such incidents, the individual will be required to work with a representative trained in addiction services to develop and follow an intensive recovery plan. Failure to comply with these requirements will result in complete exclusion unless such failure is determined between the months of November through March inclusive.
- IV. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that a reasonable time be given for the efforts of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (in seeking financial support from area municipalities) to work before considering direct solicitation.
- V. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that homeless support organizations make their best effort in continually quantifying the overall population and categories of homeless within the City.
- VI. The Homelessness Working Group recommends that in an effort to identify possible new methods for alleviating homeless-related strains on the City, consideration be given to how other municipalities throughout the country address their homelessness issues.

5. CONCLUSION

Establishment of the HWG and submission of this report was not intended to solve the homeless issue. Instead, a better understanding about the causes and effects of New London's homeless population was sought. A great deal of work has been completed by the HWG, but much more has been done by countless other agencies, some of which have been referenced in this report. As one more example, release of this report essentially coincides with the publishing of a report from St. James Church, Reference (D), addressing the matter of the SJHS from the perspective of the their parishioners. Clearly much work has been done by many dedicated people, but much work still needs to be done if

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homelessness in New London is to be managed, and a balance between it and the residents and businesses in New London is to be found.

6. REFERENCES

- A. "The Southeastern Connecticut Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness;" dated November 30, 2006.
- B. "New London Homeless Hospitality Center Update for the New London City Council;" by Catherine Zall; dated June, 2008.
- C. "Homeless Shelters;" memo from T. Londregan, City of New London Director of Law, to M. Berliner, New London City Manager; dated September 15, 2008.
- D. "St. James Episcopal Church Shelter Study Report;" dated September 13, 2008.

Respectfully submitted to the New London City Council on behalf of the Homelessness Working Group,

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