



CHARTER OAK
COMMUNITIES

Board of Representatives
City of Stamford
888 Washington Boulevard
Stamford, Connecticut 06901

December 7, 2022

RE: Public Safety Community Engagement Liaison

SUBJECT: TESTIMONY AT 12/5/22 BoR Meeting

Dear Representatives:

I am advocating for approval to create the position of Public Safety Community Engagement Liaison on behalf of both Charter Oak Communities and the Vita Health and Wellness Partnership, the network of Stamford's human service agencies and advocates.

The "Stamford community" has become somewhat segmented; our growing population has brought residents speaking myriad languages, embodying diverse cultural backgrounds, and having vast socio-economic differences. The challenges experienced by residents in these communities play out in how they seek access to, receive equitable treatment from and enjoy the benefits of our public services: police protection, healthcare access, educational attainment, and safe, affordable housing.

I became familiar with "this Stamford" over twenty years ago, early in my tenure with the Stamford Housing Authority: Public housing residents were living in a separate world (not the vibrant "Stamford" that many of us enjoy). They had a distinctly different relationship with the Stamford Police, Public Schools, Housing Authority, and other public services; fear and distrust of authority was a big part of it. Experiencing it firsthand, these relationships tended to be grievance-based, not based on obtaining mutual support, safety, and security. In part, as a result, these communities – we used to call them "the projects" - had high levels of crime, illegal drug abuse and poor educational outcomes. They were very insular, with residents only having a primary, trusting relationship with each other and with their churches, and not much else. This historic isolation fed on itself, became the challenge in itself, and seemed intractable. People – on both sides – dug in their heels...and the system adapted. It became "normal".

When the Housing Authority declared its intention to begin revitalizing severely distressed public housing, all these conditions came to the surface. They took on a life of their own and threatened to derail any attempt to create better conditions for the residents, and a sustainable benefit to the community. These complicated conditions went on for several years and became more challenging before they got better. Several members of Stamford's civic community tried to help to rebuild these essential relationships. Governmental officials and community leaders did their part: people like Elaine Mitchell and Annie Summerville. John Bocuzzi and Gabe Deluca. Courtney Nelthropp. Some of whom are gone now. Another leader, who proved to be a critical agent for conciliation, was Rev. Winton Hill, then pastor of Bethel AME Church, who attended multiple meetings in living rooms, basements, and

community rooms. A voice of calm and reason, listening to both sides – all sides! – and distilling very complicated and fraught issues, eventually helping to build consensus. To build community. Although we've progressed beyond that difficult period, Stamford continues to face similar challenges. Members of our marginalized communities lack the type of relationships to our public safety establishment that many of us take for granted. For Stamford – all of Stamford – to gain the benefit of those services and, as importantly, participate in the public safety establishment, we need to forge the type of relationships that the Housing Authority and its partners needed to create healthy and resilient communities. The building of trust, minimization of fear and ongoing, two-way communication that will come from this liaison will facilitate healthy, community relationships that will profoundly benefit both these residents and the community at large.

I urge the Board of Representatives to embrace and approve the position of Public Safety Community Engagement Liaison. It was needed twenty-five years ago. It is needed now, more than ever. Please do not hesitate to contact me for additional information or comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vincent J. Tufo'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Vincent J. Tufo
Chief Executive Officer

Cc: Bridget Fox, Chief of Staff