

**Testimony of Estela Lopez in Support of Proposed S.B. 752
Before the Housing Committee of the Connecticut Legislature
Monday, February 27, 2017**

In 1961, my family was forced to leave Cuba for political reasons. My father went to work in New York City while the rest of the family stayed in Miami to wait for the end of the school year and to save money for winter clothes. My father lived in Midtown Manhattan in a cheap room with a shared bathroom in the hallway. He worked two jobs: delivering papers in the morning to Wall Street businesses, and as an accountant at an insurance company. As my parents planned to reunite the family at the end of June, my father faced the challenge of finding housing for us.

He made a crucial decision that changed my life — though I did not realize it until much later. He talked to friends and relatives about where it would be appropriate for us to live and feel safe. He visited several places and was torn between an apartment in Flushing and the other in Kew Gardens, both in Queens. Kew Gardens won, and my parents stayed there till the end of their lives. Even though the apartment was far away from the subway station — which meant taking a bus or walking over a mile to get to work — it was in a mixed-income neighborhood with a beautiful park nearby and a diverse community. Many of my neighbors were immigrants like us: Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Russian Jews, and others. My father did not know that the neighborhood determined which school we would be assigned to, but he understood the importance of safety above convenience, of clean parks and streets, and of not being unique among the people who lived in the area.

My brother, my cousin, and I ended up graduating from Richmond Hill H.S. Our public high school was not exceptional, but it did not harm or limit us, and it provided the basics we needed: all three of us went on to college, and two of us obtained PhDs. I have always believed that my success and opportunities in this country were attributable to my access to a solid education, and this fundamental belief has driven my passion to eliminate the achievement gap. Research resoundingly confirms the importance of good teachers, a solid curriculum, an appropriate cultural environment in school, as well as other factors connected to the school setting. However, it was only recently that I began to understand that segregated housing is a significant “missing” piece of the achievement gap. If we want better education outcomes, housing segregation — racial, ethnic, and economic — must be addressed.

It is much too hard for families to find places in our state like the one in which I grown up. Connecticut is one of the most racially, ethnically, and economically segregated states in this country. We also know that schools where the children have the widest achievement gaps are in predominantly segregated neighborhoods, including the struggling inner cities. Although we continue to think there will be a magic solution to eliminating this gap, it is more productive to understand that it is the result of a combination of elements, including segregated housing and

neighborhoods. Providing affordable housing both in the cities and in the suburbs is one of the most critical strategies to ensuring better school choices and outcomes; it provides families with actual choices regarding where to live and where to send their kids to school.

Connecticut needs to take critical steps to improve access to affordable housing, and S.B. 752 seeks to promote such access by: (1) creating incentives for towns to meet their fair share of each region's need for affordable housing so that we create true choices for families; (2) ensuring the state conducts the core government functions of establishing plans to meet our housing needs in a balanced way and measuring progress year-over-year; (3) guaranteeing all government housing programs provide families the choice to live in a variety of neighborhoods, including those with strong schools, access to jobs, and low levels of crime; and (4) promoting investment in areas that are struggling to encourage economic revitalization.

It was as a result of the neighborhood I lived in, the friends I made, the safety I felt, the opportunities others had that were shared with me, and the support network my family was able to build that I was able to achieve what I have today. My parents were able to make a choice about where we lived — and that decision opened the door to a better life for all of us.