

December 18, 2022

To: Joint Standing Committee On Appropriations and Financial Affairs

RE: 'An Act to Establish the Winter Energy Relief Payment Program to Aid Residents with High Heating Costs and to Finalize the COVID Pandemic Relief Payment Program'

Greetings to the honorable members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Dianna Leighton and I am a resident of Fort Fairfield. I am writing to you today in support of the Energy Relief Act, for it would positively impact our state's most vulnerable residents, including working families with children, those experiencing homelessness, and recent asylum-seekers. My stance hinges upon the following points:

1. LIHEAP is a critical program for serving our community's most-vulnerable residents, but during a time of inflation, there are many working, middle-class families that do not meet LIHEAP guidelines. For a family of 4, that means earning LESS than \$59,349. These guidelines mean that the program serves many of those in-need, but it is important to consider that heating oil is currently \$1-2 higher than it was this time last year. If one were to apply that to 5 gallons/day in the winter, they would find Mainers of all incomes paying \$300 MORE per MONTH than last year.
2. I live in central Aroostook County, which is in the midst of an ongoing homelessness crisis. The causes of homelessness in each case is as varied as the individuals and families experiencing it, but it is impossible to ignore the number of local working families that are one medical bill (or less) away from possible homelessness themselves as is.

For those currently experiencing homelessness, including families with children, the aid provided in this bill can insure that they are offered safety and security. There's a lot of misinformation regarding those experiencing homelessness, but make no mistake that many of these folks are local individuals and families. Typically, about 25% of homeless Mainers are under the age of 18.

I understand that southern Maine is also experiencing a similar crisis that includes not only local Mainers but recent asylum-seekers. I have been frustrated and discouraged by the false and negative characterization of these individuals and families from abroad (mostly Syria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan) who are here legally as they seek a better opportunity to work and live here in Maine. Regardless of one's political stance on

immigration policy, there is a moral imperative to make sure that all people in our state are given an opportunity to be safe, fed, and warm with dignity.

3. In my part of the state, being part of a working family does not mean being comfortably settled in the middle-class of our parents' or grandparents' lifetimes. Instead, there are working families...many of whom working several jobs....who live paycheck-to-paycheck and still don't qualify for LIHEAP assistance. This is due to the rising costs on things such as food, medical costs, child care, gas, and electricity....essential commodities needed for households to run safely. For these tax-paying families, being able to receive relief and make financial decisions now can be critical for moving into the depths of winter.

Respectfully submitted,

Dianna Leighton

Fort Fairfield, ME