



JANET MILLS
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
23 STATE HOUSE STATION
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PENDER MAKIN
COMMISSIONER

December 21, 2022

Senate President Troy Jackson, Co-chair
House Speaker Rachel Talbot-Ross, Co-chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

Dear Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs,

My name is Amelia Lyons Rukema, and I am the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Specialist for the Maine Department of Education. I am writing in support of LD 3, 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 (EMERGENCY). Section A-3 which will provide to the Maine State Housing Authority funds for use in addressing emergency housing needs occurring between December 1, 2022 and April 30, 2023, for those households that were experiencing homelessness or housing instability in the State prior to December 1, 2022, will have a direct, positive impact on thousands of Maine students.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal education law that protects students' rights to access their education, no matter what is happening in their home life. It supports students who are lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes students in substandard housing, which may include missing any fundamental utilities, like heat.

Maine has thousands of students (Pre-K through grade 12) sharing housing, couch surfing, staying in hotels, campgrounds, shelters, or inadequate living situations. These numbers are increasing drastically, with some communities seeing 400-600% increase in identified students from one year to the next. Statewide, we have identified over 1,500 students as McKinney-Vento. In 2022, 23% of these students qualified because of staying in a hotel or motel. 11% of the children identified were truly unsheltered.

Progress in supporting these students is well underway, in part due to the American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth funding. The Maine Department of Education has partnered with dedicated community-based organizations serving homeless populations throughout the State to facilitate capacity-building, awareness, and identification in schools. These efforts are building community collaboration and connecting students and families with essential services and support programs. Additionally, in partnership with Gateway Community Services, the Maine Department of Education McKinney-Vento Program is coordinating how to better support historically underserved populations of multilingual students, students of color, and immigrant students in our State. All work under the ARP-Homeless Children and Youth funding is reviewed and approved by the Maine Youth Action Board, a group of young people who have lived experiences in many systems in our State.

As I have heard directly from parents and school staff, we have children in Maine sleeping outdoors, or in trailers, and other unheated and unsheltered environments. Their fundamental needs for sleep, nutrition, warmth, shelter, medical care, are often going unmet. When these students arrive in the classroom, they are unable to focus because of their physiological and safety needs. Research has found that youth and young adult homelessness is highly correlated with students dropping out of high school. Housing insecurity and homelessness is also associated with delays in meeting developmental benchmarks. Together, we must do all we can to ensure the children in our communities will have access to their education, regardless of what is happening with their housing situation.

By providing emergency housing assistance to our most vulnerable families, we can remove a significant barrier to students who are experiencing housing insecurity face when accessing their education. The funds for short-term emergency housing proposed in this bill will help stabilize housing for the families of many students in our schools. Other provisions in LD 3 will provide needed assistance to families who are often balancing the demands of paying for rent or paying for heating.

For these reasons the Department of Education supports LD 3, 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 (EMERGENCY). I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have and will be available for work sessions on this bill.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

Handwritten signature of Amelia Lyons in blue ink.

Amelia Lyons Rukema

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Specialist

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