

To: Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

From: Jess Falero, Portland ME

Date: December 21st, 2022

Re: Testimony in favor 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

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Senate President Jackson, Speaker Talbot Ross, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Jess Falero. I am a resident in Portland, Maine and the Climate Justice Co-Coordinator for both Maine Youth For Climate Justice and Maine Climate Action NOW! I'm also the founder of Maine People's Housing Coalition as well as the Harm Reduction Outreach specialist for the Church of Safe Injection. The work I do crosses the intersections of Housing, mental health care, substance use disorder, and climate change. 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.

In the middle of an unprecedented housing crisis Emergency Rental Relief and high heating costs, it is our legislators responsibility to pass emergency funds to those in highest need. As someone who has lived in this state for 8 years after aging out of the foster care system in Connecticut, I hold many experiences of what it means to sleep outside during the winter, sleep inside with no heat, and lose friends due to freezing temperatures. I hope my vulnerability in the next couple paragraphs will fill you with the urgency that we know is not only necessary but has already been present for those highly impacted and those who support them.

After spending nearly a decade in foster care, I was moved to Maine and promptly ended up on the streets of Lewiston. I had just arrived to the state a measly 4 months previously and was completely new to the area. Shortly after I ended up at Hope Haven Homeless Mission, I was sexually assaulted by a man who lived on the second floor.

I was then sent to Portland to the teen shelter where I would find myself unhoused for the better half of 6 years. From the teen shelter, to the Florence House Women's shelter I would be trafficked, sexually assaulted two more times, sleep in the snow, among many other traumatizing things that our most vulnerable face.

At 21 I found housing in the outskirts of the Portland area, but oil was too expensive for us to afford. Which meant that I would have to dress in layers, under multiple blankets and still shiver down to my bones. During this time I remember calling the crisis hotline. I was so cold that I just wanted to die. The crisis worker would come to my house, sit on a stool in my bedroom and ask me what it is that I am struggling with, all while wearing his jacket because of how cold it was in

the house. By the end of the visit he recognized there wasn't anything he could do for me, because the one thing I needed was heating assistance. This would then cause me to go back into homelessness and sleeping in the park because the Women's Shelter did not have a bed open and the Oxford Street shelter is extremely unsafe.

In March of 2021 I got a call around 10 in the morning. My friend Joy Cyr was found frozen to death on the sidewalk of a 7-11.

In all of these experiences there's more to be talked about, not only from what I've faced trying to make my way in this society but from the many stories like mine. The crisis is real, the need has been here, and the compounding factors of inflation and the pandemic have exacerbated the problem. If this bill is not passed more folks are going to be layering up in their homes, shivering uncontrollably under multiple blankets at risk of homelessness or death.

It's never been a moral failing but a systemic failure that we force our most vulnerable people to endure such trauma that folks like you couldn't begin to understand. So believe us when we say the emergency is real. I urge you to vote yes on LD 3 and save lives this winter.