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December 21, 2022

Testimony of Rep. Laurie Osher regarding

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 *Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs*

President Jackson, Speaker Talbot Ross and Members of the Committee: I am Representative Laure Osher of Orono, Maine. I am here to speak in favor of LD 3 and support the suggested changes proposed by Senator Rick Bennet and Senator Nicole Grohoski that offer important changes to the bill. I am grateful for your scheduling this extraordinary public hearing so that the impacts of this bill may be better known and considered. Many Maine people are in urgent need of heating and housing relief. It is incumbent on us to help them and also to act responsibly with state funds. The emergency relief should be targeted to those in need. Spending all of the surplus now leaves no funds available to deal with the many other pressing issues, including but not limited to our opioid epidemic, our failing nursing homes, and the dire shortage of direct care workers for people who have been promised services.

The proposed amendment by Senators Bennet and Grohoski targets meaningful relief on a sliding scale to people facing a high energy burden, based on data.

- It leaves the windfall from federal Medicaid money untouched so that it can be used to serve chronic funding shortfalls in needed programs;
- It reduces total cost of checks by nearly 50% to \$210 million;
- It provides up to \$1,200 per family in funds to those in need who are not eligible for the check program or don't qualify for LIHEAP; and
- It encourages energy efficiency through education and incentives for long-term benefit.

It leaves untouched the roughly \$160 million in Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) funds so they may assist the needs they are intended for – such as mental health, nursing homes, developmental services, and services for individuals with brain injuries.

Families in my district and across the state have suffered from chronic underfunding of these programs and the low compensation rates for direct support professionals that have made it difficult to recruit people for these challenging jobs. This has created emergency situations, often exacerbated by the stresses of the pandemic. When considering emergency spending of this magnitude, the focus of the aid should be on assisting those who are in the greatest need. Sending money to every taxpayer who earns \$100,000 a year (or couples earning up to \$200,000 per year) is a misuse of funds.

LD 3 has impacts beyond the energy emergency many Mainers are facing. The bill before you proposes to spend all available surplus at the very beginning of a difficult winter and a challenging legislative session, where other needs will present themselves, some known and some unknown. Please consider lowering the income thresholds for the payments and the other suggestions in the amendment proposed by Senators Bennett and Grohoski. Thank you.