

Good afternoon,

My name is Mary Cook and I work for The Opportunity Alliance and a resident of Maine. I am the Program Director of the Emergency Rental Assistance program, which has served Cumberland County with necessary rental and utility assistance, including hotel assistance for those without shelter through the Pandemic.

I am here today in support of LD 3. The majority of what I will speak to is on the urgent need to keep the \$21 million for emergency housing assistance in LD 3 along with the necessary heating assistance for Mainers. This funding will ensure that the over 1000 households with no other housing options are safe this winter. It will also allow for support for pop-up shelters to be created to ensure that all Mainers that may find themselves without shelter stay alive through the winter months.

We as a State need short-term emergency solutions to keep people safe and warm through the winter. I would like to spend some time speaking to the human stories that we are hearing daily from the folks we serve.

We are serving families that are in hotels. The Opportunity Alliance alone is serving 66 children. This is just a portion of the families we are seeing across the State. We know from the Opportunity Alliance that this will be 66 children who will be displaced to unsafe living conditions or without shelter at all. We have families who have been established in their places for months as this is their only option for housing. Who have children that are attending school, parents that are working in the communities they are in. Without this funding we are not only putting people's safety at risk but also disrupting the education and employment of these families.

We have a woman in her 70s who was housed for years in her apartment, this was her home for her retirement. After her landlord decided to sell her property and the rent was increased, she was forced to find a new place to live. With only her social security income and the extremely limited affordable housing, she did not find an apartment before she needed to move out of her previous unit. She has now been in the hotel with ERA assistance for months. Although she is working with her case manager for long-term housing solutions there will not be an option for her before the winter and she will be forced outside.

We have a Veteran that is managing his cancer treatments while living in a hotel. We have young folks who are just getting started on their own and are living in hotels as they navigate employment or furthering their education. There are disabled Mainers managing their health who would not be able to manage these health issues if they were to be unsheltered.

These are just a couple examples of households that would be at significant risk of being unsheltered this winter if this funding is not made available. I can say definitively that there is not a plan for these folks if they are displaced from the hotels if this funding is not made available. The surrounding communities and across the State of Maine we are seeing a drastic increase of unsheltered homelessness and the shelters are overburdened. I have worked in housing services since 2010 and have never seen such a need for emergency shelter options then where we are at right now.

The Opportunity Alliance and I are committed to working towards long term solutions of housing that is more sustainable for both these residents of Maine and The State. However, at this time if this bill doesn't pass as, it is written now. We will see avoidable deaths this winter throughout the State of

Maine. We need to take care of our neighbors and be sure we don't have anyone facing an unnecessary Maine Winter outside.

I am proud to be a resident of Maine and I know we as a State feel strongly in caring for our neighbors. I am asking that you pass this bill to protect all Mainers through the cold winter and continue to work with us to find long-term solutions for housing for all Mainers.

Thank you for your time.

Mary Cook, LCSW

Program Director- ERA

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Mary Cook
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LD 3

I hoped to speak on Zoom but I may of been too late in signing up. See attached for statement