

Krista Hall
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LD 199

Honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: My name is Krista Hall, I live in Portland, and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 199.

I would like everyone to imagine the following scenario: Suddenly, your family is in danger. You are being threatened for expressing your political beliefs, and people have already broken into your home. They took the water you were boiling for dinner and scalded your youngest child. They grabbed your spouse and you have no idea if they are alive or dead. You decide you must flee. You grab all of your children, tending to your youngest as best you can, and head on foot for your relative's home. They live far away, and you hope you will be safe there. Days after you arrive, you hear screaming from the main house. The people have tracked you and are now killing your brother in law and raping your sister. It is moments before they will find your family in the nearby building. You again collect your children and flee to the nearest port. Your family stows away on a boat headed for South America, and you land in Brazil. You have no money so you panhandle your way through countries, hitching rides when you can, and you make it to Central America. Along the way, someone tries to hurt you and your 8 y/o tries to defend you, getting their leg broken in the process. You persevere through jungles, floods and armed guerillas, and you all make it to the United States. Luckily, you aren't placed in a detention center. Someone said that Maine was a nice, kind place to live, so you use your last dollars to get a bus there.

Arriving in Maine, it is cold. Everything is in a foreign language. You have no idea where to go, but someone at the bus station tells you to go to the shelter. Although you have no idea what the shelter is, you point to the map they gave you along the walk and eventually you get there. Someone who speaks your language is there and helps you to understand what to do. You have to ask for help. That is new for you – you came from a well-educated background back home. You were a lawyer, or a doctor, but that doesn't matter now. Someone tells you that you cannot work here until you complete a lengthy and confusing application, and even then you have to wait 6 months to start working. They say there are some places that might be able to help you. Go to GA, they say. You wonder what GA is. You wonder when you might have a normal life again.

I ask you to consider this situation – it is based on a real-life parent whose child is served by my agency, Gateway Community Services. We cannot provide this deserving mother her own services because she does not qualify for full Mainecare, which is the circumstance of nearly all asylum-seeking adults. The inequity of this coverage gap not only impacts these asylum-seeking individuals, who came to the US seeking simply safety for themselves and their families, but is also contributing to the current state of overwhelm faced by our housing systems. So many families are homeless, and it falls to overworked volunteers, school social workers, and shelter staff to work to get them housed. In the first 7 weeks of 2023, for example, Portland's Oxford Street shelter saw 553 asylum seeking individuals, and over 75% of its current population are asylum-seekers. Because asylum seekers cannot seek employment for at least 6 months, they are reported to be in a "holding pattern" once at the shelter, which has also resulted in the displacement of the typical homeless population, many of whom are now living in tents throughout the city. More than 80 asylum seekers arrive each week, and resources are incapable of keeping up with this need.

I am a licensed clinical social worker and I have been employed as the Clinical Director of Gateway Community Services for the last 6 years or so. Gateway is a community mental health agency founded by a Somali refugee, and we are among the largest immigrant-owned mental health agencies in the state. We bill Mainecare for our services, which means that we are unable to serve the adult asylum-seeking population as they are typically ineligible for the full Mainecare coverage we require. At best, some may have Emergency-only coverage; however, this means exactly what

it says – there is no coverage for routine/preventive medical care, and certainly no coverage for mental health services. We have an agency full of amazing case managers and counselors who have a wealth of culturally-competent expertise in meeting the needs of New Mainers; however, our hands are tied when someone lacks full Mainecare. We turn away people on a near-daily basis due to this insurance inequity.

Were these asylum-seeking adults able to access full Mainecare coverage, we and so many others could serve them at our agencies. Case managers in particular are social services experts, adept at navigating the systems and assisting people to meet their needs. We help our clients every day to meet needs that are fundamentally the same as our asylum-seeking population – housing, employment, mental health and the like. Maine's social service agencies are a critical resource in mitigating the housing crisis and in assisting people to get off the streets and out of the hotels, and yet our hands remain tied when it comes to serving this one population.

Supporting LD 199 would open Mainecare for asylum-seeking adults, who can now only access medical/mental health care and social services support through a handful of (often over-extended) community agencies able to provide pro bono services.

Asylum-seekers are here because they could not be safe in their home countries, and many have suffered greatly not only before their forced migration but during the often grueling and dangerous journeys they have undertaken to get here. Further trauma in resettling, experiencing homelessness, being without resources, being unable to work, and living in a strange and foreign country with little to no support can be excruciating to these adults, many of whom are parents wanting nothing more than a better, safer future for themselves and for their children. I urge you to support LD 199 to extend fair and equitable access to healthcare for asylum seekers. Thank you.