

Maureen Ausbrook  
Starfish Village, Waterville  
LD 2

Senator Pierce and Representative Gere, and honorable members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing:

My name is Rev. Maureen Ausbrook; I am the founder and director of Starfish Village, a faith-based ministry of the First Congregational Church of Waterville and I am submitting my testimony in favor of LD 2: An Act to End Chronic Homelessness by Creating the Housing First Fund.

I work closely with two other clergy, both of whom have extensive backgrounds in social welfare and sheltering and also benefit from the help of several nurses, a retired social worker and community activist. These 6 other professionals join me in this testimony and strenuously support LD-2 and the creation of a Housing First Fund. Their names are below along with mine.

Starfish Village provides direct aid, and advocates for, the most vulnerable people in Waterville and surrounding communities. We strive to meet needs not met elsewhere and are often the port of last resort. Starfish Village receives referrals from many community partners, such as General Assistance, KVCAP, Kennebec Behavioral Health, Catholic Charities, the Waterville-Winslow Interfaith Council, the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter and many other social welfare and faith-based services. People are also referred to Starfish Village by those we helped in the past and often people find us through word of mouth in the community.

We typically help several hundred people a year (individuals and families); approximately half are homeless or at high risk for imminent homelessness. We estimate that more than half of the people we see yearly require access to 24-hour support services in order to remain successfully housed.

A more granular view of those we serve is this: An alarming number have minor children; a significant number have mental health and addiction issues; many live in encampments, in vehicles, or couch surf (if they are luckier than most) and only a very few choose this life. In our experience, aside from the fact that there is a crisis in housing, most are unsheltered because they are unable to gain entry to a homeless shelter (either because of space at the shelter or due to one or more bars to entry) while they wait to find permanent affordable housing. Many already have housing vouchers, often for mental health reasons, but cannot match the voucher with housing. However, when provided with housing in the past, many have failed to remain stable because they were not in a Housing First Program with 24-hour support, such as what LD-2 proposes to fund.

In summary, we support LD-2 because it creates the funding necessary for a Housing First Program that provides 24-hour support services. We support the Housing First Program because (1) it confers immediate dignity and worth, valuing people not for where they are on life's journey but for who they are: children of God; and (2) because Housing First is also good stewardship of our society's finite resources. By removing barriers to homelessness while at the same time providing professional support services, it has been proven that Housing First reduces the drain on a community's social welfare, police and fire services, addresses and improves mental health and substance abuse issues, provides the stability necessary for possible employment, and improves the health, welfare and education of children.

Maine needs a robust Housing First Program and that requires the kind of funding LD-2 will establish.

Rev. Maureen Ausbrook, Waterville  
Joan Brown, Skowhegan  
Rev. Nancy Findlan, Belgrade Lakes  
Jacqueline Kulik, Winslow  
Rev. Ian Lynch, Waterville (and Pastor, First Congregational Church)

Sally Melcher-McKeagney, Waterville  
Nancy Sanford, Waterville