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Regional Chamber
of Commerce

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Testimony in Support of LD 2-An Act to Address Maine's Housing Crisis

Joint Select Committee on Housing

April 4, 2023

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing,

My name is Eamonn Dundon, and I am the Director of Advocacy of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. We represent 1,300 businesses in our region who employ over 65,000 Mainers. We are submitting this written testimony today to express our organization's support for LD 2.

For decades, the City of Portland has shouldered the largest burden of any municipality in the state when it comes to the provision of services for people experiencing homelessness. This has come at a massive cost to municipal taxpayers, but as the largest service center in the state we have taken on this challenge with often limited support from the state and federal government. While asylum seekers have dominated much of the news regarding the challenge of sheltering large amounts of unhoused people, Maine-based and other domestic homelessness cases have been an equally large challenge to confront, particularly regarding the long-term stayers who use shelter resources for an extended period.

We have seen great promise in the housing first model in the handful of projects developed in Greater Portland, but it is not enough to confront the numbers we have been seeing over the last three years since the onset of the pandemic. Even with the City of Portland's commitment to build a new world-class homeless services center, the numbers in this population and the duration of their needs far exceeds what one municipality can sustainably provide without long-term solutions in place to move long-term stayers to. As Cullen Ryan of Community Housing of Maine has pointed out to you in this committee, and to our members



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at an Eggs & Issues discussion on this topic last year¹, housing first has the potential to dramatically decrease the costs incurred when these folks end up in the criminal justice or medical systems, both of which are much more likely to happen when someone lacks the security of a place to call home.

Despite the increases to shelter capacity in Portland and around the state in recent years, we are still on the precipice of a crisis when it comes to our shelter systems and housing first developments are an essential piece to addressing that threat. Right now in Portland there exist several rapidly growing tent encampments that are threatening the health, safety and cleanliness of our city for residents and visitors alike, and we need a rapid deployment of solutions to ensure we do not slip into scenarios seen in cities like San Francisco and Portland, Oregon where neglect of social needs in those communities, and the defacto sanctioning of unsafe encampment practices, not only threaten the safety and dignity of people experiencing homelessness but also the continued viability of our commercial districts and downtown areas. Already due to the pandemic many of our members have faced challenges with depressed foot traffic and vitality in our downtown cores, and the increased presence of individuals experiencing homelessness concentrating in unsafe and unclean conditions threatens to undermine that recovery.

We thank you for your time and commitment to all Mainers, and we ask for your expeditious approval of this important legislation.

¹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhiWnPslWQE&list=PLHiUaD31mPsdZQ5rmTgGkbt7vVgbbjx4T&index=10&ab_channel=PortlandRegionalChamberofCommerce