

H.O.M.E. Inc.

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*Serve First Those Who Suffer Most
Proud member of Emmaus International*

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify **in support of LD 2** An Act to Address Maine's Housing Crisis. I am Tracey Hair, resident of Bucksport and Executive Director of H.O.M.E. Inc. which oversees four Homeless Shelters in Hancock County with a 53-bed capacity, a permanent housing program for low-income and homeless families, as well as programs to support a housebuilding program which has built 53 homes with low-income families.

H.O.M.E. Inc. has been doing this work since 1970 and I have been with the organization for nineteen years. Over the last three years H.O.M.E. Inc. has seen an increase of 55% of people presenting for shelter who are chronically homeless. We serve approximately 202 people each year, and an estimated 20 who are considered chronically homeless. Additionally for the first time in my nineteen years working in Hancock County, we estimate approximately 21 individuals sleeping outside or utilizing warming centers in Orland and Ellsworth. People with complex healthcare and mental health needs.

Chronic homelessness is a serious **public health** issue that places a strain on healthcare and criminal justice systems. Typical housing models place requirements on chronically homeless individuals that are often experienced as insurmountable barriers to housing. Housing First models attempt to reach this population more effectively. Housing is a basic human right, not a reward for clinical success, once the chaos of homelessness is eliminated from a person's life, clinical and social stabilization occur faster and are more enduring.

Several years ago, an elderly man sought shelter with us after he was found lying in the driveway at his trailer that was condemned years prior. After his health was stabilized, he entered our shelter. The man was in our shelter for more than 180 days and after receiving a voucher, he was housed. Staff quickly identified the man would need supports to live independently – supports which were not forthcoming at the time. The man ultimately lost two housing options due to hoarding and kitchen fires. This presents a perfect candidate for site-based housing with intensive supports.

Permanent Supportive Housing combines affordable housing with optional but assertive services that focus on keeping vulnerable families stable and housed. **This strategy, which is often designed for chronically homeless people, can also benefit families.** Although supportive housing programs vary, they share core principles: they aim to keep people housed, the services often involve a range of providers including physical and mental health, employment, benefits, and others, and tenants do not risk eviction if they refuse services, but providers are persistent in their offers to help. These ongoing efforts stand to decrease the burden of chronic homelessness for affected individuals, their families, communities and society-at-large.

Housing First is associated with reduced utilization of publicly funded services such as shelter, jail, and emergency rooms, and provides a strong foundation for housing retention in a population that is traditionally characterized as unmotivated for and unsuccessful in housing.

As our state faces one of the most severe affordable housing crises in its history, we must equip ourselves with the resources to respond with positive and effective outcomes. As a provider of emergency shelter, I understand and appreciate how precious tax dollars are and we take our responsibility to steward funding very seriously. We are committed to working to end homelessness in Maine and to deliver the strongest network of services for people experiencing homelessness. **The front line in that network is access to housing as a first response.**

Thank you for taking the time to review this bill and I encourage your support.



Tracey Hair
Executive Director

H.O.M.E., Inc. enhances the quality of life of people who have fallen on challenging times by honoring their dignity, attending to such basic needs as food and shelter, supporting their long-term health and development, and fostering a vibrant and mutually supportive community.