

My name is Pastor Jeff Logan, and I've been working as a co-pastor with Grace-Street Ministry for the past eight years, and I have been Executive Director since 2019. Grace-Street was founded to work with the unhoused in Portland, and we continue to do that every day but Saturday. I'm personally out on the street on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and most Sundays.

I am writing in vociferous support of LD 599, particularly as it applies to Elena's Way in Portland. The fact is that Elena's Way is by far the best emergency shelter in Maine. Preble Street took all the valuable lessons that they learned during the pandemic when they ran the Sullivan Gym at USM for the unhoused. In addition to providing a warm, safe place for chronically homeless folks to stay, with laundry facilities, meals and showers, they also have trauma informed staff who are trained to manage this population with compassion and on-site case workers to help people with everything from IDs and food stamp cards to working with them to find the next step in their housing journey – whether a Housing First efficiency or a stand-alone apartment. There is no other facility that provides all of this, and certainly no other facility that will allow committed couples to be in the same shelter and not separated by gender.

And the fact is, as you all know, the numbers of the unhoused continue to increase whereas the capacity for emergency shelter is either fixed, or declining (two more motels offering emergency shelter in South Portland will be closing at the end of April). The new Homeless Services Center on Riverside was at capacity 24 hours after it opened. And when you add the large numbers of asylum seekers who continue to come into Portland, there is simply no room at the inn for the other unhoused. The fact is that the Salvation Army Gym that served as an overnight shelter for the unhoused when it was 40 below zero over the winter is now exclusively used to house asylum seekers, as was King Middle School Gym and now the Portland Expo. By late summer, a new building out on Blueberry Road will also be exclusively for asylum seekers. Even the two faith communities who apply for grant funding are only housing asylum seeking families, and 70% of the beds at the new Homeless Services Center are taken by asylum seeking individuals. And it's my understanding that all the new housing that Avesta is building will be for asylum seeking families.

This is in no way to cast aspersions on people who have endured so much trauma in their home countries, but only to emphasize the lack of emergency shelter space in Portland. To even consider a landscape without Elena's Way is beyond foolish. The fact is that Elena's Way successfully provides temporary housing for the most at-risk members of the homeless community – those who are often restricted from other shelter, and most of whom have co-morbidities of poorly managed mental illness and substance use disorder. If these folks were to be kicked out onto the street, the cost of extra police and other emergency services that would be incurred would more than make up in costs for the funding that this facility is requesting. And that doesn't even take into account the simple human toll of living outside in Maine. I have assisted at way too many memorials to even want to consider the loss of 40 safe beds in downtown Portland.

Just this week, on Wednesday, I started my time on the street walking the tent city on the Bayside Trail. I talked to lots of folks, gave them socks and the occasional Dunkin' card, and heard the stories of the violence, the cold of winter, the larceny and the nearly constant disrespect of passers-by. I've seen the fruits of this kind of housing – frostbite, sometimes to the point of gangrene, simple wounds that have gone septic because of lack of showers and clean clothes, and long stories of the depression and suicidal ideation that the hopelessness of their situation engenders in vulnerable members of this community. Even the neo-Nazis who ended up at Monument Square started their sad parade by walking the Bayside Trail and yelling at the people tenting there.

And then there was the woman who OD'd in her tent and was found dead in the morning by members of the community. In Elena's Way, there would have been eyes on her and she probably could've been saved. Out in a tent in the elements, there was no one to notice until it was too late.

I left the tent city and walked up to Elena's Way to drop off some contractor's bags that a young man staying there had asked me for. He wanted to use them to clean up the garbage generated by the tent city on Bayside Trail. He had time to think of others, because his whole day wasn't consumed with simply making it through another 24 hours of unsheltered homelessness. Believe me, it's a full-time job.

I then spent some time chatting with staff and with clients that I knew from the street. It was quiet and peaceful, no one was shouting or swearing at anyone, everyone was warm and fed. And I think the most important thing I felt that morning was that, instead of the despair of folks in tents along the trail, I felt a pervasive sense of hope. And the value of hope cannot even begin to be estimated.

Thank you.