

Mary Cook
The Opportunity Alliance
LD 599

Greetings Chair Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Mary Cook, LCSW and I am the Program Director for the ERA and PATH programs at the Opportunity Alliance. I am writing you today to ask that you support the passage of LD599: An Act to Provide Support Services for a Transitional Housing Program for Homeless Persons.

The PATH program works with those that are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Since the pandemic, we have seen a consistent increase in unsheltered homelessness. Currently, the City of Portland reports there are over 100 encampments, and we see no sign of these numbers decreasing. This is also not unique to Portland as the rise in unsheltered homelessness increases across the State. We as a Community and State are in desperate need of Shelter and Housing.

The implementation of Elena's Way is extremely exciting as a provider in the community, who has been doing this work for 12+ years. Elena's Way has already had an enormous impact on the community in providing trauma informed shelter for 40 individuals, who have experienced chronic unsheltered homelessness. Elena's Way has been able to provide shelter to those that may be restricted or unable to access other area shelters. A person who doesn't access shelter may make this choice for a variety of reasons. Typically, this decision is around how the standard shelter negatively impacts their mental health and doesn't support them in navigating their substance use and treatment. Preble Street has considered all these factors when developing and implementing Elena's Way as a shelter.

We as a PATH team have witnessed the incredible outcome of this work, as our program participants have transitioned from their encampment into Elena's Way. We are seeing folks getting meaningful rest and care that they were not receiving being unsheltered. This has shown to be impactful as we are seeing folks being able to start long term planning around their housing, that they were not able to while unsheltered in a constant state of survival. I believe that Elena's way will continue to bring impactful change to those most harmed by the trauma of homelessness and strengthen our communities.

I strongly encourage you all to pass this bill to fund Elena's Way. Elena's Way is a great example and model of how our State can move towards trauma and person-centered shelter options.

Thank you for time and consideration,

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