

Written Testimony of Debra Rothenberg, MD, PhD

In Support of LD 599, An Act to Provide Support Services for a Transitional Housing Program for Homeless Persons

April 13, 2023

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

My name is Dr. Debra Rothenberg, I am a medical provider and educator in Portland. I am writing today in strong support LD599, titled *An Act to Provide Support Services for a Transitional Housing Program for Homeless Persons*.

Having provided care for people experiencing homelessness for many years, I have witnessed the remarkable transformation that occurs when someone who has been unhoused finally gets to stay in a supportive, wellness-focused, trauma-informed shelter setting.

The data show what those of us working with people experiencing homelessness witness on a daily basis: Our patients have much higher rates of physical health issues, mental health conditions, and substance use disorder; they are unable to overcome system barriers to accessing outpatient health care due to symptoms of the very conditions for which they need treatment; they are over-reliant on emergency departments and law enforcement/EMS for crisis intervention and are often “lost to follow-up” at critical care transitions from emergency departments, or crisis stabilization units. Living in this kind of chaos has a quantifiable impact on lives: A recent study in the Journal of American Medicine Association comparing people experiencing unsheltered homelessness who were displaced in routine police sweeps to people who did not experience recurrent displacement showed a 50% increase in hospitalizations, an 11% decrease in life expectancy and a 151% increase in overdose mortality associated with frequent displacement.¹

A transitional housing program as proposed by LD 599 would make a huge difference and help prevent these types of outcomes by providing comprehensive case management and daily supportive living, helping individuals access the care they so desperately need. I know this because I have seen it happen. Patients I have seen transition from unsheltered homelessness to Elena’s Way in Portland, have established relationships with a Primary Care Physician and been more consistent in taking medications for chronic conditions. They have consistently appeared to be happier and healthier than when they were trying to access day space to rest and shower while unsheltered. A program like this needs to be supported and have its outcomes studied. I am certain the outcomes will show significant improvement in individual lives and marked decreases in cost to healthcare, social services, and law enforcement agencies. I therefore urge you to support LD 599. Thank you.

¹ Barocas JA, Nall SK, Axelrath S, et al. Population-Level Health Effects of Involuntary Displacement of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Who Inject Drugs in US Cities. *JAMA*. Published online April 10, 2023. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.4800