

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

My name is James Whitfield. I am a resident of Portland, currently staying at the Elena's Way Wellness Shelter. I am writing to ask for your support for Elena's Way by backing LD599: An Act to Provide Support Services for a Transitional Housing Program for Homeless Persons.

My wife and I have had to stay outside together in a tent for a long time. Though I left during COVID, I came back with a desire to finish what I started—a sense that I could get somewhere. I wanted to give Preble Street a good name. We stayed outside for a long time because the Oxford Street Shelter doesn't let couples stay together. Last summer, when we heard that the Elena's Way shelter was going to open in the fall, we started advocating for ourselves with Preble Street staff. I know there's limited space here—and it felt for a while like we got put on hold, but we were persistent in keeping communication with Preble Street staff. Soon after Elena's Way opened, we were able to move in, staying together in a shelter for the first time.

The first day I got off the streets and started staying here, I got access to a computer tablet. I sat down and applied for my first job. I wanted to do it right then, and now I've been working at Walgreens for the past six months. I feel that it's important to give 100% to everything, and staying in Elena's Way enables me to do that. Having shelter and a job has encouraged me to stay clean and sober, to prioritize my ability to work and make changes for myself. I encountered a lot of stigma before, when I was staying outside. When you've got a job and you're homeless—you can't do simple things like taking a shower before work or showing up with clean clothes every day. Now that I am getting my basic needs met, I don't have to worry about being judged at work, or where we will get our next meal. Every day I get good rest and food. I have consistent support from the staff. That I can feel. I have stability. Instead of worrying, I can focus on self-growth, working on finding inner strength and transforming my habits.

I've been able to apply my work ethic. With support from staff, my wife and I have submitted applications and are on a bunch of different waiting lists for apartments, and we are hoping we will have housing soon. I am just grateful to be here. Ever since we moved in back in October, I wanted to be the first success story out of this place. I believe it can help others like it's helped me.

I would like to close by expressing my thanks to all the employees of Preble Street, and specifically Elena's Way, who work hard every day to bring people food and meet their needs, and to restore hope. They help people like me to transition out of homelessness to have a better life.

Please consider supporting LD599.

Thank you for your time.