

May 5, 2023

Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: Support of LD 1426, *An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance* and LD 1664 *An Act to Increase Reimbursement Under the General Assistance Program*

Dear Sen. Baldacci, Rep. Meyer, and Committee members;

Please accept this letter as the testimony of the Metro Regional Coalition (MRC) in support of LD 1426, *An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance*, and LD 1664 *An Act to Increase Reimbursement Under the General Assistance Program*.

The MRC is a longstanding collaboration between the cities of Portland, South Portland, and Westbrook, and the towns of Cape Elizabeth, Falmouth, Gorham, and Scarborough, staffed by the Greater Portland Council of Governments. The MRC focuses its work on issues impacting Greater Portland, from housing and homelessness to municipal and regional partnerships wherever possible.

Over the past several years the MRC has worked to help manage the increasing number of unhoused people in our region. But increasingly our communities are struggling to provide the shelter and services needed by a continuously expanding number of unhoused people.

We need your help.

Specifically, we need two things. One is very simple – we need your fiscal support. Please increase state reimbursement of municipal General Assistance costs from 70% to 90%, and provide additional financial reimbursements, as suggested in both bills we are supporting today. Municipalities all over the state need this policy change.

Our second request is more complex, but equally urgent.

The expansion of unreimbursed General Assistance costs is an unsustainable burden on the local property tax. And despite the heroic efforts made by municipal staff and nonprofit and faith partner organizations to support unhoused people in our region, the use of General Assistance as the backbone for supporting unhoused people is already broken.

We believe General Assistance was never designed or intended to serve as an all-purpose support system for a rapidly expanding population of unhoused people suffering multiple disruptions in their

lives. GA works to help people through short-term disruptions in life, but it is unable to serve as the primary housing and support services program for people suffering long-term disruptions in housing and other life circumstances.

Our members, and municipalities across the state, need your help to shift these unsustainable burdens away from GA and the local property tax towards a better system that more effectively helps everyone who needs housing and other support for long periods of time.

That new system can be designed in many ways. Partnerships between all levels of government, and with nonprofits, faith leaders, and the general community are all available to build a better networked support system that does not rely on GA at its center.

But to be clear, additional state funding will be needed to end the current overreliance on GA and replace it with a state and federally funded partnership model to support unhoused people with long-term needs.

You have many complex bills before you today. But our position is a simple one.

As you work to make changes to General Assistance today, we ask you to shape a better system for tomorrow. A system to sustainably provide housing and support services to people in long-term need. A system that combines state and federal resources with local and regional expertise and moves away from the current over-reliance on GA as the default support system for unhoused people.

We know this is a difficult request, but the alternative is that our current system, despite best efforts, will continue to fall short of what unhoused people need, and deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views, and please let me know if the members of the MRC can provide anything more to support your important work on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Foley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "F".

Michael Foley

Chair, Metro Regional Coalition
Mayor, City of Westbrook