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*Testimony of Representative Kristi Mathieson presenting*

## **LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Kristi Mathieson. I have the distinct pleasure of representing the beautiful seaside community of Kittery, District 151. I am here to present **LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance.**

I started my community volunteer work in my early 20s working Sunday nights at a local homeless shelter for women and children. The shelter had a TV room where we would gather and mostly just talk. I heard many stories about why the families ended up at the shelter. Many were hard working people who were living paycheck to paycheck and were just one unexpected expense away from ending up at the shelter.

General Assistance (GA) programs at the municipal level can be one key tool to provide temporary financial assistance to those experiencing a crisis or financial hardship. The programs are intended to be a safety net for those in need. Unfortunately, the GA program has many barriers, not just for those in need, but also for the municipalities and CAP agencies working so hard to try to help those in need.

I have had multiple conversations over the last three years regarding general assistance. I met with constituents trying to access GA funds, with local CAP agencies, municipal leaders, GA administrators, local nonprofits and local landlords. The issues that came up over and over again in these conversations around general assistance were:

- It's an underfunded mandate.
- Administrative costs of GA and supplying the workforce is difficult for the towns to budget.
- These administrative costs differ between municipalities depending on need/use of GA funds.
- The rules around administering GA funds is confusing and inconsistent.

- The rules around rental maximums are confusing for GA administrators and those trying to stay housed.
- Rental maximums are not covering current rental rates.
- The barriers to accessing the program (eligibility, location of the GA office, stigma and shame) causes additional stress for individuals already struggling.
- CAP agencies find it hard to support multiple municipalities with the inconsistencies around GA administration.
- Landlords don't feel comfortable accepting GA funds with the rental maximums being lower than other rental assistance programs.

The combination of these issues cause significant stress and uncertainty for individuals who are already struggling to make ends meet. They cause stress for the municipality and CAP agencies trying to help their community members. They cause isolation of people in our communities who, without access to these resources, cannot become self-sufficient, or (like one of my elderly residents) cannot stay housed. To address these issues, general assistance programs need to be reevaluated and restructured. They need to provide support and reduce barriers to accessing assistance. Our neighbors need to be in stable homes!

This bill would do the following:

- Requires the State to reimburse municipalities for 90% of their General Assistance costs.
- Requires that General Assistance rental maximums align with every other rental assistance program in Maine.
- Requires that eligibility determinations occur every 6 months to a year.
- Requires GA administrators to complete a training course within 120 days of appointment or election.
- Requires the State provide a 5% reimbursement for municipal administrative costs.
- Requires the Department of Health and Human Services to provide necessary services to support municipalities.

General assistance support is crucial for providing a safety net for our vulnerable neighbors. We need to keep our community members housed to avoid the devastating consequences of homelessness and housing insecurity. I know you are considering many bills and appreciate your thoughtful attention today. I ask the committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1426.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.