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May 12, 2023

Re: LD 1721, An Act to Create Transitional Housing Communities for Homeless Populations in the State

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing, my name is Cullen Ryan, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM houses Maine's most vulnerable people and advocates on their behalf to see that everyone is included as part of the community.

I am testifying in support of LD 1721, An Act to Create Transitional Housing Communities for Homeless Populations in the State.

*This bill creates the Transitional Housing Community Construction Program Fund under the Maine State Housing Authority to create transitional housing communities, which are clusters of transitional housing dwelling units for homeless individuals and families to provide stability and to allow the individuals and families to transition to permanent housing. The bill directs that transitional housing communities be created throughout the State designed to cover all 16 counties. The bill directs the Department of Health and Human Services, through independent housing services under its administration of assisted housing programs, to coordinate, arrange or provide services including job training and health care services for residents of transitional housing communities. The bill also provides one-time funding to the Maine State Housing Authority to create transitional housing communities and funding to the department to provide independent housing services to residents of transitional housing.*

*The Maine State Housing Authority shall create 400 dwelling units of transitional housing for families, with at least one transitional housing community within each of the 9 homeless response service hubs. And 500 dwelling units of transitional housing for single individuals, with at least one transitional housing community within each of the 9 homeless response service hubs.*

*This bill provides \$12 million each year for ongoing funds for support services associated with transitional housing, and one-time funding in the amount of \$45 million in each year of the biennium for transitional housing community construction.*

LD 1721 would create a fund to help support the creation of transitional housing communities throughout the state, as well as critical support services for these communities. This addresses one of the largest gaps in Maine's ongoing response to the increased population of people experiencing homelessness in our communities: transitional housing. Transitional housing allows people to be able to resolve their homelessness and attain permanent housing with some short-term assistance.

The transitional housing communities this bill would create are ideal for non-citizens seeking asylum.

This population is among those most likely to begin working as soon as they are legally able. However, the mandatory federal waiting period to obtain a work permit for people seeking asylum is lengthy and is a large barrier to attaining self-sufficiency. Until asylum seekers are able to work, they have no means to support themselves but for vital safety net programs. Demonstrated patterns suggest that this population is likely to need very little assistance after obtaining work status. As such, this population is perfectly poised to enrich our state and nation.

To ensure Maine's vitality, and to solve Maine's current workforce crisis, we must create a path for asylum seekers to achieve gainful employment, and that will take some kind of temporary housing.

The large influx in Asylum seekers looking to start a safe, new life has caused displacement of traditionally homeless populations from homeless shelters. Asylum seekers now account for 80% of the people utilizing the City of Portland's new Homeless Services Center – the largest shelter in the state which has traditionally served more than a quarter of the entire homeless population of Maine. Because asylum seekers are stuck there, this shelter is unable to have some 166 of its beds serve people who would most likely stay for a night or two. And it is similarly unable to serve chronically homeless populations – the very group most affected by the displacement because they are landing outside.



The resulting displacement is directly responsible for a sudden rise in unsheltered homelessness in Portland and surrounding communities. There are unintended consequences of having this population land in Maine's homeless shelters. Please see the attached op ed.

Maine needs a two-track system for adequately addressing both populations. LD 1721 would solve this, as Asylum seekers arriving in our communities are prime candidates for the type of housing this bill would create. If targeted towards this population, these communities would remove Asylum Seekers from the misnomer of homelessness, significantly free up capacity at Maine's largest emergency shelters, and immediately minimize the number of people sleeping outside.

Please support LD 1721. Asylum seekers are our workforce crisis solution and need a safe place to live until their status can allow that.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

# Commentary: End homelessness and welcome asylum seekers – Maine can do both

[pressherald.com/2023/02/18/commentary-end-homelessness-and-welcome-asylum-seekers-maine-can-do-both-2/](https://pressherald.com/2023/02/18/commentary-end-homelessness-and-welcome-asylum-seekers-maine-can-do-both-2/)

By Cullen Ryan

February 19, 2023



Portland is about to open its [new homeless service center](#). It promises to have everything needed to end homelessness quickly and efficiently for single adults. It should be a remarkably collaborative and effective shelter, something poised to help solve one quarter of all homelessness in Maine.

Except now, it might not.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cullen Ryan** is executive director of the Portland-based nonprofit Community Housing of Maine.

This service center was designed to serve mostly circumstantially homeless single adults. It will also serve a smaller group with serious and persistent mental illness and/or other complexities that make their homelessness more challenging to solve. All the right ingredients are there to meet the full spectrum of need and provide quick exits to housing.

But Portland's Oxford Street Shelter has recently morphed to address a new need; the current shelter is serving as the de facto asylum seeker resettlement program for the state of Maine. The shelter has become a holding tank.

Although Maine desperately needs affordable housing, asylum seekers are not homeless because of that. They are blocked from employment and housing due to federal laws. They have already proven their resiliency and overcome tremendous adversity. Serving them as homeless misses the mark.

At the root, these are people migrating to Maine in search of peace and work. There is plenty of both.

Maine has an enormous workforce shortage. There are 44,000 unfilled jobs and 24,000 people unemployed. That means Maine needs 20,000 new workers. And here they are – newly arrived, talented, willing and motivated. They would enter our workforce except for one thing. Our federal law requires complex paperwork followed by a six-month waiting period before employment. And during what becomes eight to 12 months, this population is not eligible for any federal assistance. People arrive and patiently wait.

Our federal delegation has been working in the House and the Senate to fix this, but Congress has yet to pass one of the many bills our delegation has sponsored. That leaves Portland in a conundrum.

This can be solved.

The state and federal government could collaborate to create an asylum seeker resettlement program including temporary living space, connections to work sectors and support from immigrant service programs like the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Program. That way, our state could welcome this willing workforce and fast-track it into the many employment sectors desperate for workers. Gainful employment would position asylum seekers to pay for housing and make a peaceful living in Maine. But Maine does not have any such program.

Portland is, without question, doing the right thing to meet the temporary needs of the asylum seeker population. But we must also recognize these are skilled survivors who follow all the rules and dutifully line up to secure a bed, inadvertently displacing populations we had intended to serve in the new Homeless Service Center. Some 60% of Oxford Street Shelter's current population are asylum seekers. The city expects that will approach 100% very quickly; there is a long line at the border of people practiced at enduring hardships – and ready and willing to work.

The unintended consequence is that Maine's most challenged homeless populations are now landing outside, unsheltered and at tremendous risk because Portland can't meet the needs of both populations simultaneously, at least not without more help.

The new, well-designed center for serving people experiencing homelessness might not do what we hoped it would; we may see displacement overwhelm other parts of Maine, more people outside, more encampments and people very visible on the streets, right as it opens. And people will look at this and say: Well, that new service center didn't work, did it? That, sadly, might thwart other wise investments in ending homelessness.

We should welcome arriving asylum seekers as a wonderful opportunity, and we should help this population establish itself quickly and successfully. And we should end homelessness. We need a two-track system to do both. By throwing asylum seekers into the overwhelmed homeless arena, we fail both populations.

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[Commentary: I was shot in the Southern California desert. Why? That's the wrong question. Next »](#)

[Susana Hancock: As Maine's winters retreat, we risk much more than skiing](#)

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