

Amy Johnson
Portland
LD 1721

Dear Sen. Pierce, Rep. Gere and the honorable members of the Committee on Housing,

I support LD 1721, An Act to Create Transitional Housing Communities for Homeless Populations in the State. I have been an active volunteer with Greater Portland Family Promise since its planning stages in 2016. In that time, I have had a front-row view of what it takes to provide emergency shelter to families experiencing homelessness. It is rewarding work to be sure, and I'm proud of the impact our organization has had on the families and children we have housed. Their resilience and determination is both inspiring and humbling. However, what is clear to me is that what we really need most at this point in time is not to keep expanding our emergency solutions, but to invest in more transitional housing.

LD 1721 is the right intervention at the right time to serve the needs of asylum-seeking families in particular. Family Promise is a national model for emergency shelter, and the Portland chapter is unique in serving primarily asylum-seekers; this is the nature of who is homeless in our area. Over the years, we have developed a lot of knowledge of the types of supports that help families to be successful once they are finally able to obtain stable housing. The proposed language for 22 MRSA §7864 does a good job of capturing the appropriate services. I also support the length of time (of about 24 months) for provision of transitional housing; in my experience, families have both the know-how and the financial circumstances to be ready for permanent housing at that point.

During this transitional time, asylum-seeking families are not always easy tenants at first. There is a lot to learn: what is trash and needs to go in a "purple bag" vs. what is recycling; proper disposal of cooking grease; the importance of emptying the dryer vent; the appropriate use of 911. The list is long. By the time families exit our emergency shelter program, they have learned a lot of these rules but we are only serving a small slice of the community and there is a much larger need for these transition supports.

My interest in this area is more than just academic. I myself have been trying to figure out how I could make a personal investment by owning a multi-unit property to serve as a first landlord to asylum-seeking tenants during their learning curve. I have looked into several avenues including buying a multi-family house to rent to Family Promise. But this would not be adding to the supply of housing. I am now at the point of investing in new construction and even have a parcel of land that is suitable – but as you probably would suspect, the math does not currently work on such a project in today's market. As an individual property owner, I would have to charge market rents to break even. There is only so much financial risk that my husband and I are willing to take. While LD 1721 would not benefit me personally as written because of the scale of 25 dwelling-unit communities, I believe that establishing more funding for transitional housing development will eventually improve the conditions for other smaller-scale projects like mine.

I am passionate about this cause because I believe that immigrants are a key solution to Maine's impending demographic winter; as a matter of economic vitality we should be seeking ways to entice asylum-seeking families to other communities outside of Greater Portland. The requirement to establish communities across the state is a great way to shore up our infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and commitment to these issues. I urge you to support LD 1721.

Sincerely,
Amy Johnson
Portland, ME

