

**TESTIMONY OF SUSANNA RICHER
IN SUPPORT OF
L.D. 2136, “An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals”
Committee On Housing
January 23, 2024**

Senator Pierce, Representative Geer, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for considering my testimony in strong support of L.D. 2136, “An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals.”

As a resident of Portland, it is impossible to turn a blind eye to the urgent need for increased funding for low-barrier temporary shelter, as well as financial support for other resources that will bring our unhoused in from the cold and address the wide variety of issues that cause homelessness to begin with. People are literally dying outside from exposure in Portland.

A few months ago, I decided to try to learn about the causes and potential solutions for our homeless neighbors. This effort included spending time on the streets of Portland talking to unhoused individuals that came across my path and the outreach workers that help them. I encourage all policy makers to take the time to do this as a part of the planning process for solutions.

What I learned was that every story was different and thus a variety of solutions are needed to solve, but that the gateway to all, the immediate priority, is to support accessible, low-barrier shelters that provide not only shelter and food, but also consistent connection to housing, medical, mental health, and addiction treatment resources.

I have come across many unique stories along the way – a woman begging me to find a sober living facility for her after she was released from detox with nothing and nowhere to go. A man with his dog, desperate to go inside during a zero-degree night when the shelter would not allow his dog to accompany him inside.

However, with his permission, I am going to talk today about my new friend, Bruce Cavallero. Bruce is a 45-year-old homeless Army veteran who is currently sleeping under a tarp outside Elena’s way, a small, low-barrier shelter in Portland. He is on the long waiting list to enter the doors of this shelter. He is also eligible for a housing voucher that will pay up to \$1800 a month in rent, but there are no indoor options available to him. Bruce continues to wait on the sidewalk for his turn to go inside.

He almost froze to death a few weeks ago, suffering from hypothermia... thankfully he was found in time by an early-morning visit from a volunteer outreach worker who was able to get him help.

After that scare, Bruce secured a bed in Portland’s large, warehouse-style shelter located 5 miles outside the city center, that holds well over 200 people. Unfortunately, due to his severe PTSD triggered anxiety, Bruce only lasted a week at this shelter, and is now back on the street with only blankets and a tarp.

In Bruce’s own words, “Because of my PTSD, if I wake up and I don’t know the people around me, I have severe panic attacks. In the (larger) shelter, there are so many unknown people.” PTSD can be dangerous to the person experiencing the disorder, as well as to people in the vicinity of the person experiencing the attack. An anxiety attack of this nature can result in injury, recovery relapse, and even death.

Bruce has gone through 6 encampment sweeps in the last year. In the most recent sweep, he lost his I.D., tent, propane heater and sleeping bag, as well as a crucifix with strong sentimental value. Even if he had a tent, he could not set it up in Portland, because of the city’s recent pledge to enforce the no-camping ordinance.

As a result, it is critical that Bruce, and others like him, have access to smaller, low-barrier shelters that specialize in the

different challenges that our unhoused neighbors face ...for those that have substance use disorders, for those struggling with severe mental illnesses, for elderly, and for domestic violence survivors.

That we allow a veteran, or any human being, to live outside in the Maine elements, is a true failure of our government and society.

Right now, even when every shelter bed is full at Portland's Homeless Services Center, by my unofficial estimate, there are still at least 100 people living on the city streets. That number is probably higher. If the low-barrier shelters in Bangor close due to lack of funding, it will only amplify the overwhelming homeless crisis that exists in Portland. If Portland does not receive more funding, unhoused individuals throughout the state will be negatively impacted.

I am not educated on what relevant laws currently exist in this state, but I also think it is important for every municipality to be required to have a plan in place for emergency shelter, whether that plan be that a town operate its own warming center, or contract with and provide transportation to, another shelter in a nearby community.

Finally, forcing people to live outside is not only inhumane, but expensive. The emergency medical costs alone could probably pay for shelter and housing for all who are unhoused in Maine.

Please vote "Ought to pass" L.D, 2136 (and the other bills of similar focus before you today). Thank you for your time and consideration.

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Portland won't pause homeless sweeps this winter. Now what?

<https://www.pressherald.com/2023/11/21/portland-wont-pause-homeless-sweeps-this-winter-now-what/>