

Testimony in support of LD 2214 Part HH, Governor's supplemental 2024-2025 budget

Feb 23, 2024

Chairs Senator Peggy Rotundo and Representative Melanie Sachs, and members of the Joint Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

I am Christopher St John, a volunteer member of Tedford Housing's Capital Campaign Committee appearing on behalf of Andrew Lardie, the Executive Director of Tedford Housing, who has a conflicting engagement, and I am a resident of Brunswick.

Reviewing the Report to The Housing Committee in December of 2023 on the Emergency Housing Relief Fund, I was struck again with the extraordinary variety of projects to address homelessness that have been enabled by this Fund. This legislature, the Administration, local governments, and scores of organizations in every corner of the state, trained staff, volunteers, and temporary workers, have responded to extraordinary numbers of unhoused individuals and families. Many people achieved some warmth, safety, and in many cases more permanent housing through the funding you have provided in this program.

In Brunswick, we have benefitted from the warming center at the Gathering Place, only on cold days last winter and every night this winter. The much discussed and misunderstood project by the Developer's Collaborative at the Brunswick Landing has already placed 23 asylum seeking - families, and will house 33 more when the project is completed. After two years thirty of the units will become accessible to those or any families at rents limited by income. This will be the largest single addition of below market rent housing in Brunswick over recent decades.

In addition to warming centers, and some badly needed permanent units, the Fund has supported landlord incentive programs, rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention, legal services to help reduce clients' barriers to self-sufficiency, and over 425 long-term emergency shelter beds, and another 625 transitional housing beds.

We are deeply grateful that Maine has fully recognized the dire shortage of affordable housing and the consequent increase in homelessness, and has taken all these steps both to increase permanent housing and these many strategies to address homelessness. We urge you to include the additions to capacity that the Governor's proposed budget will allow.

However, none of us can rest in this effort, while housing insecurity and needs for shelter continue to grow for too many Maine families. While this fund has enabled the creation of all the additional shelter beds cited above, the Emergency Shelter and Housing Assistance Program which provides partial annual operating funding for some 40 shelters through the state, has not seen an increase in regular appropriations since 2017. "One-time" additions of \$10 million and \$5 million respectively added in each of the last two years could not make up the increase in beds and costs to serve more people. LD 2136 pending in the Housing committee would continue to add \$10 million per year to the ESHAP shelter operating program. We urge you to consider adding that amount to ESHAP as part of the supplemental budget. We see this is as an essential part of the good work you will continue with the proposed addition to the Emergency Housing Relief Fund before you today.