



February 23, 2024

Testimony in support of the Emergency Housing and Affordable Housing Production Sections in the Proposed Supplemental Budget

Presented by Julia Stone and Rev. Nathan Richards

On behalf of the Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center: A Mission of South Parish Congregational Church

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Pierce, Representative Gere and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. My name is Julia Stone and I am offering testimony on behalf of the Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center, A Mission of South Parish Congregational Church, and community members to testify in support of the sections outlined in the Governor's proposed supplemental budget related to Emergency Housing and Affordable Housing Production.

The Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center is an organization working to provide a low-barrier, safe and inclusive environment for individuals who are unhoused in our Augusta community. We work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders, partners and community members to offer a pathway for individuals who are unhoused to connect to crucial health and social services which support prevention, treatment and recovery services for those in need.

We all have seen or experienced first hand the increasing challenges that have arisen from the emergency housing crisis in our communities. It has become quite evident within the past few years that the number of unhoused individuals has increased drastically. The Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center participates as a member of the Augusta Housing Task force and as part of the Hub 6 team tasked with implementing a state-wide strategy to address homelessness. We work diligently to identify the barriers to safe and affordable housing options, and support those who are unhoused in connecting with resources that improve overall health and well-being.

Thanks to the support of dedicated and committed community members, local area organizations and the funding provided by the Emergency Housing Relief Fund the Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center is operating for its second season. We originally opened our doors November 1, 2022 and ran until April 30th, 2023. The funding support allowed us to increase the original hours of operation (7pm-7am) to 5pm-7am. and be able to open

the doors two hours earlier each night for guests to access the warmth and safety in the coldest months of the year. During the first season we supported 186 unduplicated guests and provided 5,069 bed stays. We offered support to guests from ages 18 to 92, veterans, those who identified as chronically homeless, those who recently were evicted, and anyone that was in need of a warm, safe place to stay regardless of criminal background, mental health challenges, physical/medical challenges, substance use challenges and those experiencing active addiction, and would otherwise not qualify for admittance to other shelters. In the past 3 months alone 5 guests have been successfully housed with the support of our staff and other local resources working together toward a common goal. Without the funding that was authorized by the Legislature and the Governor we would not have been able to operate this season, which will run from October 15, 2023-May 15, 2024.

We acknowledge that the housing crisis poses an array of challenges and is multifaceted. It is also an “affordability crisis” that we are watching unfold each and every day, and why we fully support the Affordable Homeownership Program. The construction of new housing units is a necessary step toward a solution, and the ability to afford to live in those units is critical.

The Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center is one point along the much larger continuum that it takes to support those facing housing insecurity and those that are currently unhoused. We are so grateful for the funding we have received that has undoubtedly saved many lives in the past two years. Last winter not one person in our area froze to death outside in the cold winter months, and that is a success. We are in strong support of the **\$16 million for the Emergency Housing Relief Fund** as well as the **\$10 million for the Affordable Homeownership Program**. This funding will provide not only immediate support and resources for those who are currently unhoused and most vulnerable, but also a step toward long-term sustainable solutions to those in dire need within our community, our neighbors.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and for the support that has been given already that allows us to offer a warm and safe space for our community members to rest their heads each evening during the coldest winter months here in Maine.

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