

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, Members of the Joint Committee on Housing, Senator Rotundo and Representative Sachs, and Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Cheryl Harkins. I reside in South Portland. I am an Advocate with lived experience with Homeless Voices for Justice and the National Alliance to End Homelessness. I also serve on the Board of the Statewide Homeless Council to represent Region One as an advocate with lived experience. I aim to be voice for the most vulnerable, the voiceless community of the unhoused. I am writing this testimony to provide you with some additional information about the impact and importance of low barrier shelter. Throughout our testimony and conversations about the funding deficit faced by low barrier shelters, you have heard many stories, and many data points, about the importance of keeping low barrier shelters open. I want to elaborate on this by providing some background information and stories about clients and community members who have benefited from access to low barrier shelter in Portland.

Much of this information has been presented in the past, whether in online articles from Preble Street, or in former testimony from clients and staff at Elena's Way. I hope that this testimony can show some of the positive impacts that are felt when folks have access to low barrier shelters and accompanying supportive services. For many individuals, the care and support that they receive at a low barrier shelter is life-changing, and allows them to begin healing and exploring new opportunities.

The following is a paragraph from the testimony of a client staying at Elena's Way, which was submitted during a public hearing on LD 599, a bill that was formerly submitted to assist with funding for Elena's Way:

*"The first day I got off the streets and started staying here, I got access to a computer tablet. I sat down and applied for my first job. I wanted to do it right then, and now I've been working at Walgreens for the past six months. I feel that it's important to give 100% to everything, and staying in Elena's Way enables me to do that. Having shelter and a job has encouraged me to stay clean and sober, to prioritize my ability to work and make changes for myself. I encountered a lot of stigma before, when I was staying outside. When you've got a job and you're homeless—you can't do simple things like taking a shower before work or showing up with clean clothes every day. Now that I am getting my basic needs met, I don't have to worry about being judged at work, or where we will get our next meal. Every day I get good rest and food. I have consistent support from the staff. That I can feel. I have stability. Instead of worrying, I can focus on self-growth, working on finding inner strength and transforming my habits."*

The full testimony can be found [here](#).

Not every client at Elena's Way is able to write and deliver testimony such as the above. The needs of individuals staying the shelter are diverse and often co-occurring, presenting challenges to staff and clients alike. It is through dedicated, patient, and intentional social work that clients at Elena's Way are successful in remaining in the shelter space. When testifying on LD 599 last year, Henry Myer, Director of Elena's Way, spoke to the need for shelter for individuals who struggle to access other shelter spaces.

*"Mary is a tiny thin young woman who dances around Elena's Way responding to internal stimuli. She moves to the tv screen where an animal show is playing and stands inches from it speaking to the animals, pointing all over and never stops moving, even when she's standing in one place. Eventually she*

*is drawn to a table where staff have laid out nail care items with various colors of polish. Mary paints her nails a bright yellow. Her hands shake and her body regularly contorts in jerky, spastic movements as she laughs and mixes nonsensical language with a conversation she tries to have with staff. The yellow nail polish mixes with the dirt covering her small fingers and contrasts with old, dried blood on her hand. She is unable to speak coherently for more than a brief sentence. This is her baseline. She is endearing to staff. She keeps to herself, but cannot sit still, moving constantly around the shelter. Her behavior is not challenging yet she cannot be redirected. Elena's Way keeps her warm, stable, and safe, and this allows her to have the weekly contacts with her behavioral health provider so she can access medication."*

Henry's full testimony can be found [here](#).

I know you have heard these stories like these before, and will likely hear them again. However, it feels important at this juncture to lift these stories up again, particularly as we consider the potential closure of one of the few low barrier shelters in the State of Maine. Elena's Way is far from the only shelter with stories like these ones. Across the state, low barrier shelters provide individuals with support, care, and stability. Low barrier shelters often face the most difficult challenges in the shelter system, and continue to meet this need each day with patience and dedication to their clients and their communities. I present you with these stories today as a reminder of the need for these spaces across our state. The ongoing low barrier shelter funding deficit places shelter operators in a continuously precarious position, and limits the ability for growth at a time when low barrier shelters are needed more than ever.

We ask that you please consider the desperate and ongoing need for these spaces, and assist low barrier shelter providers by providing ongoing funding for these operations. People do not lose their value simply because they have no immediate structure around them. The unhoused are individuals who should be recognized. This funding will help. Housing and shelter are basic human rights.

Thank you for your time.