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January 23, 2025

Re: LD 209, An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM. CHOM invests in collaboration, including advocacy designed to help Maine speak with one voice on behalf of people in need. I am a member of the Statewide Homeless Council and also chair the Maine Homeless Policy Committee.

I am testifying in opposition to Part S of the Supplemental Budget for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025 (LD 209). Part S limits housing assistance under the General Assistance Program, with the exception of temporary housing and emergency shelters, to a maximum of three (3) months in a 12-month period per household. It also limits municipalities from exceeding the maximum levels of assistance for all non-housing related assistance to no more than 30 days in a 12-month period per household.

Part S would make substantive changes to the General Assistance (GA) program to the detriment of vulnerable people in Maine.

The Supplemental Budget in the Second Session of the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature made changes to GA statute prohibiting municipalities from exceeding the maximum level of assistance for no more than 30 days for assistance granted on hotels, motels, inns or other lodging places. Part S would expand this to include *all* non-housing categories of assistance. GA is operated at the local level; local GA Administrators ought to retain the flexibility to go above GA maximums for a longer duration of time in the rare instances in which it is necessary for the health and well-being of Mainers who depend on GA to meet their basic needs.

Current GA law already limits housing assistance to no more than nine (9) months in a 12-month period. Although I wish there were, there is no time limit on poverty. An even more limiting, arbitrary time limit on the safety net for people in poverty is detrimental, particularly to children.

Most people receive GA for brief time periods; the vast majority of people utilizing GA need assistance for far less than the time limits that these bills would impose; only a small minority needs it for longer. For people who need it for longer, there are usually reasonable and valid reasons. People who access GA for longer periods of time are most commonly people with complicated issues beyond just poverty. This arbitrary cap will lead to more homelessness and hunger in Maine communities. The small subset of people who need assistance longer are typically working toward self-sufficiency but will be forced out of stable housing and directly into homelessness once they meet this time limit. People who utilize GA are already required to put every penny to their name towards their basic necessities and apply for any and all other potential resources – it truly is a program of last resort.

Maine's most vulnerable populations need access to safety net resources and rental assistance through GA, especially with MaineHousing's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV – Section 8) Program being frozen for months with no end in sight.

Changes to the safety net will have a growth effect on homelessness in Maine – and that will cost far more than \$10 million a year (the projected annual cost-savings for this Budget initiative). A study conducted by MaineHousing recently determined that it costs \$97 per person per night to have someone in an emergency shelter bed, creating a monthly cost of approximately \$2,950. In contrast, the GA single room occupancy (SRO) rate is \$1,434 per month in Portland, the equivalent of \$46 per person, per night. We need to support people in accessing shelter and housing, with housing stability as the end goal. This means supporting people remaining in housing and getting there quickly if homeless.

Maine needs to enhance and expand its GA Program, not codify arbitrary limits to the detriment of Maine people. Please oppose Part S of the Governor's Supplemental Budget. It helps none of us to



keep people in poverty. The safety net is there to keep people alive. GA is Maine's safety net of last resort. It protects thousands of Mainers by keeping a roof over their heads and food when they have nowhere else to turn.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.