

2/14/25

Senator Routundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Appropriation and Health and Human Services Committee.

My name is Aaron Richard, and I am a resident of Old Town. Thank you for the opportunity to write to you today about the urgent need to prioritize care over criminalization in Maine's state budget. As someone who has witnessed firsthand the consequences of underfunded behavioral health services and housing instability, I urge you to make investments that truly reflect Maine's values.

The Governor's proposed budget increases funding for law enforcement while cutting critical substance use and behavioral health services. This budget includes over \$16 million for additional State Police positions, despite existing vacancies and no clear justification for these hires. Meanwhile, it eliminates funding for crisis-receiving centers in Aroostook and Kennebec Counties—proven solutions that connect individuals in crisis to care rather than cycling them through jails and emergency rooms.

While I don't live in the counties in question, I do have firsthand professional experience with individuals that would be negatively impacted without access to these services. I have spent a now decade long career working with individuals of all ages with developmental disabilities, providing services in both direct and indirect capacities. In the time that I've provided these services, the need for behavioral health or Crisis services, substance use treatment, and access to stable housing very commonly intersect with my work and services that I have coordinated for these individuals, all of which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, with some areas not yet fully recovering.

In my experience, the need for Crisis services is not inherently due to someone being at risk of causing harm to themselves or others. It is more often a result of an individual becoming a victim of circumstances, most often due to a loss of stable housing or even other medically necessary services. These circumstances can be incredibly stressful to anyone that experiences them, especially if they are already a part of a vulnerable community to begin with.

As a society, we have begun to change our understanding of addiction. We have broadened our perspectives that it is not entirely caused by a supposed moral failing of an individual, understanding that factors like an individual's predisposition for addiction, and again, the circumstances that led them to substance use are factors to be considered. Regardless of how or why someone began their use of substances, allowing them to have access to safe areas to use, which can also provide resources to sobriety can save countless lives.

The need for stable housing is a need that is shown to have an increased need across the entire country, and will likely not resolve itself if state or federal governments continue to not fund solutions that could help resolve this crisis. According to a report from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies that examined census data in 2022, half of renters across the country are

paying more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities. Focusing in on our state, MaineHousing defines affordable housing if the *household* spends no more than 30% of their income on housing related costs. The average annual income for a Maine worker is \$58,279 per year, 30% of which is \$17,483.70 in housing costs per year, or \$1456.98 per month. Depending on the specific source that you use, and the location in the state that the data is calculated, the average cost of rent in the state is anywhere from \$1,000 to \$1,600 per month. While this may be manageable for the average working-class family, the people that I serve often have an income of roughly \$1,000 per month, almost entirely excluding them from affordable housing, as it is currently defined, without the external support of a service provider running group homes or Section 8 housing where available.

A common theme that I've used in this letter is that the people that need these services are more often victims of circumstance instead of moral failures because they couldn't meet their own needs. The importance of reinvesting in the services that I've outlined instead of a bloated policing budget could not be clearer. The people that are negatively impacted by the current lack of these services already face a higher risk of public scrutiny and police involvement than the average person. Additionally, the only thing that separates the average person from those who rely on these services is luck. At a time when it is clear that hard work no longer equates to any kind of stability, any working-class person could wind up needing these services as quickly as a single missed paycheck. If you approve the current budget proposal, the message you are sending to the people of Maine is that you will either succeed with little to no social safety net, or be at immediate risk of incarceration. We are all human, and therefore deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and part of that is ensuring that we can all get our basic needs met, even if that requires some kind of help from others. This is what a functioning government should strive to do. You have the power today to decide if you want to be a government that helps those that need it, or fails them the second that they can no longer help themselves.

I thank you for your time, and would be willing to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Aaron Richard
(207) 290-7996
Arichard8191@gmail.com