

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen and Representatives Gattine and Meyers, and Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Housing and Economic Development Committee members,

My name is Brian Townsend, and I am here today speaking on behalf of the Emergency Shelter Assessment and Response Team (ESART), sixteen members, including service providers, advocates, and local and state officials, united in addressing the need for adequate emergency shelter capacity in Portland through data-driven strategic planning, action, and advocacy. We aim to ensure everyone in our community can access a safe shelter with resources to escape homelessness. ESART opposes limiting GA rental assistance to three (3) months in a twelve (12) month period. If this proposal were to go into effect, it would cause devastating and irreversible harm to vulnerable populations and low-income Mainers.

GA rental assistance is currently the primary tool available to emergency shelters and front-line caseworkers who move people from homelessness into housing. It is used as a last resort for the most vulnerable in our communities. In [December 2024](#), 58% of the people who exited homelessness from an emergency shelter in Portland used GA to do so. This proposed change would pose a challenge for landlords we work with, creating another barrier to identifying housing for those presently in shelters.

This dramatic GA proposal comes amid frozen Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) and long waiting lists for the Permanent Supportive Housing Program and BRAP. Since these vouchers are on pause, many people remain in emergency shelters or, horrifically, sleep outside. Now is the worst time to slash GA-supported housing because Maine's homeless shelter system is maxed out; it will mean people will be forced to sleep on the streets. Last week, there was tragic news of two unhoused individuals being found dead in the woods in the Riverton neighborhood of Portland.

It is far less expensive to use GA to keep people housed than it is to pay for shelters. The maximum GA reimbursement for a 0-bedroom heated unit in Portland is \$1,434/month. MaineHousing estimates that an average shelter bed cost is \$3,776/month. This calculates an annual savings of \$28,104 per person on GA. Keeping people housed by GA is 163% less expensive than supporting them in a homeless shelter.

The proposal also caps General Assistance on non-housing-related living expenses to 30 days in 12 months. This proposal is irresponsible because it will lead to food insecurity, limited access to medical care, and housing instability. Local GA offices/municipalities should retain the flexibility to go above GA maximums for a longer duration of time in rare instances when it is necessary for the health and well-being of Mainers who depend on GA to meet their basic needs, especially when facing

emergencies and no additional support programs to fill the gaps other than GA, that this change would create.

Maine's homeless response system is already overburdened, and this would exacerbate a crisis. Please oppose this portion of the Budget. We can't afford to have more people in our homeless system, and the proposal to limit GA rental assistance to three months will do that.

Thank you.