



Honorable 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 the Executive Director at Commonspace, an agency that supports individuals experiencing homelessness, mental illness, substance use disorders, and legal systems involvement, through programs that deliver supported housing, peer support, recovery coaching, and emergency food and shelter, in Cumberland, Lincoln, and Sagadahoc Counties.

GA rental assistance is currently the most essential resource available to our emergency shelters and our housing navigators, who endeavor to move people from homelessness into housing. GA has always been, and remains, a last resort for the most vulnerable in our communities. The “last resort” has never been as needed within our communities as it is today, with Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) frozen and with virtually interminable waiting lists for the Permanent Supportive Housing Program and BRAP. Since these vouchers are on pause, many people remain in emergency shelters or, in some cases, sleep outside.

Commonspace operates the Winter Warming Overnight Shelter in Portland, where we welcome as many as 100 guests on the nights we are open. Diversion from the warming shelter is not an option, as area emergency shelters are full. The best option for every person experiencing homelessness is housing, but our Housing Supports team is severely limited by the lack of available vouchers, combined with a persistent deficit of affordable housing options. Slashing GA-supported housing now would be the nail in the coffin in this situation, with severely negative impacts that would be felt throughout the state.

To reiterate a point that has been frequently made: it is much more cost-effective for GA to keep people housed than it is to pay for shelters. At the same time, the proposal caps General Assistance on non-housing-related living expenses to 30 days in 12 months. This change will lead to food insecurity, reduced access to medical care, and further housing instability. We strongly believe that our local GA offices and our municipalities should have the discretion to go above GA maximums for a longer duration of time in those rare instances when it is necessary for the health and well-being of Mainers who depend on GA to meet their basic needs.

Maine's homeless response system is already overburdened, and this would exacerbate a crisis. At a time when the federal government is very evidently intent on eliminating the already threadbare safety nets that exist to support our most vulnerable community members, it falls now more than ever on our State and on our municipalities to attend to their safety and wellness. Please oppose this portion of the Budget. We can't afford to have more people in our homeless system. This would undoubtedly be the result of limiting GA rental assistance to three months.

Sincerely,

Brian Townsend

Brian Townsend
Executive Director
Commonspace
briant@commons spacemaine.org