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March 18, 2025

Re: LD 698, An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM. CHOM's small staff works collaboratively to create housing enriched with services to help people overcome challenges.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 698, An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine. *This bill provides ongoing funds to support emergency homeless shelters in the State - \$5,000,000 in each year of the biennium.*

Emergency shelters depend upon a variety of funding streams, that even when combined do not cover the cost of providing shelter. And, with additional shelter beds added to our system, the already insufficient funding has been stretched even thinner.

Shelters haven't had enough resources to maintain sufficient capacity and staffing to meet the need for years. Our shelters are in crisis. For Maine to safely meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, we must have a robust, adequately funded shelter system – it is the foundation of our homeless service system.

Shelters in Maine have been full, operating overflow shelters, and/or forced to turn people away due to insurmountable capacity issues for years. And they are currently operating at large annual deficits – some as high as \$855,000. Without additional funding allocations emergency shelters in Maine will close – some imminently (*please see the attached document for additional information*).

We need all of Maine's shelters to remain open, or we will most certainly see an exponential growth in encampments.

Maine is already on the precipice of widespread unsheltered homelessness. We experienced this briefly in 2023. Our shelter system is currently full, and it is starting to overflow. If shelters close or lose capacity, it will leave people with no choice but to congregate outside.

Encampments are not good for any city or town. Access to shelter and housing is.

It is extremely challenging to house people when they are outside because they are overwhelmed trying to survive each day and night. Having a shelter system with sufficient capacity allows the focus to shift from keeping people alive while outdoors (managing a life-threatening crisis) to housing people and keeping them housed (ending homelessness).

Emergency shelters provide a foundation from which people can be safe and focus on the complicated work of getting housed. Shelter staff are successful in assisting people with paperwork, and all the forms and appointments necessary to qualify for affordable housing.

Getting people housed creates cost savings for local, county, and state governments. People who are chronically homeless are up to 29 times more likely to be in the hospital and up to 57 times more likely to be in jail than when unhoused than when housed. It is 27 times more expensive to be in the hospital and 4 times more expensive to be in jail than in housing.



Please also consider expensive and deadly health outcomes: According to 2023 state overdose data, 73 people died of overdoses within the homeless population versus 533 who died of overdoses within the 1.395 million population of Maine. That meant that a person was 32 times more likely to die of a fatal overdose if unhoused than if housed. People are more likely to die of a fatal overdose in an encampment than they are in a supervised shelter. And encampments create other problems beyond a much higher risk of overdose.

Encampments are miserable and hopeless places where people who do not feel good about themselves experience trauma and take enormous risks. People are more apathetic about living when they are in these kinds of desperate circumstances, and that affects their decision making, and has health consequences. People are more likely to participate in risky behaviors that can lead to contracting dangerous and potentially lifelong illnesses, such as Hepatitis C and HIV, when in an encampment than they are in a supervised shelter.

In 2024, 14 people in the entrenched Bangor encampment contracted HIV and that same group of 14 also contracted Hepatitis C. According to state DHHS data, it costs \$30,000 for a one-time Hepatitis C treatment – a generally successful cure for Hepatitis C. The treatment for HIV is \$36,000 annually *in perpetuity*.

A robust emergency shelter system brings people indoors so that people experiencing homelessness in Maine can be better served in their communities. This is how Maine will end homelessness. But we need our shelters to have the funding needed to keep their doors open in order to do so.

This Administration and the Legislature have made important investments in housing and ending homelessness – thank you. But the current situation is dire, and an additional injection of resources is vital.

Please support LD 698 and any other bill that would provide additional shelter funding, so we can ensure emergency shelters across Maine can continue to operate so we can all work together to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.