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March 19, 2025

Re: LD 731, An Act to Prohibit Municipalities from Barring the Creation of Homeless Shelters

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM. CHOM creates housing and inclusive communities for vulnerable populations in Maine.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 731, An Act to Prohibit Municipalities from Barring the Creation of Homeless Shelters. *This bill prohibits municipalities from enacting or enforcing ordinances that prohibit the creation or operation of a homeless shelter.*

Encampments are not good for any city or town. Access to shelter and housing is. Unfortunately, Maine has a serious shortage of affordable housing and a hostile weather climate. We should ensure that everyone has housing. Until we can, we should insist that everyone has a safe place to be indoors. That is the best practice recommendation of Maine's Statewide Homeless Council.

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.

The best practice strategy across the country is to ensure that homelessness is rare, brief, and one-time. The best way for that to happen is to stabilize people so they can focus on getting housed. Homeless shelters do exactly that.

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, which will leave people no choice but to congregate outside. Barring the creation of professional shelters when they are needed locally only works to increase unsheltered homelessness and encampments.

In order for Maine to safely meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, it's important that we have a readily accessible, adequately funded shelter system – and specifically, one that responds to changing local need. Barring the creation of homeless shelters doesn't eliminate the need for them, it merely ties the hands of the homeless service system working to end homelessness.

Please pass LD 731 so we can work to create sound solutions, rooted in best practices, to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.