



**Sagadahoc County
Sheriff's Office**

**Joel A. Merry, Sheriff
Brett Strout, Chief Deputy**

752 High Street, Bath, Maine 04530
Telephone (207)443-8529 Fax (207)443-8224

LD-698 An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine

March 18, 2025

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development, my name is Joel Merry, and I am the Sheriff of Sagadahoc County. I am providing testimony today in **Support** of LD-698.

For the past sixteen years, as Sheriff of Sagadahoc County, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Tedford Housing, our local homeless services provider in the southern mid coast area. I have served on the Board of Directors and have seen firsthand the essential work that is provided for our homeless population.

It is no secret that the State of Maine has a housing problem, and good work is being done to resolve that problem, but it will take time and cannot happen overnight. In the meantime, our deputies often come in contact with individuals sleeping in vehicles, not just in our larger communities, but in some of our smaller, more rural communities. Our deputies encounter individuals who are couch surfing and once they overstay their welcome, they have no place to go. Deputies have referred individuals and families to Tedford Housing services over a dozen times in the past year.

However, there is a fear that these much-needed homeless shelter services are at risk of diminished capacity, or closing, if they are not funded appropriately. LD-698 would keep shelter services funded at a level that would allow them to continue to meet their mission.

By statute, every law enforcement agency has a homeless diversion response protocol that was set forth by the Office of the Attorney General. It requires law enforcement to provide a response other than traditional entry into the criminal justice system. One of the requirements is for law enforcement officers to make referrals to available crisis services including emergency and transitional housing, which is our shelters. However, if our shelters have to reduce services due to funding, the protocol becomes a hollow gesture.

My agency, like most other law enforcement agencies in the state, wants to keep people out of jail and at the same time ensure they are safe. Without adequate emergency shelter services, I fear this won't happen.

Increased funding will keep our emergency shelters open and allow them to be the available resource law enforcement needs to do the work that is required of us.

I urge you to pass LD-698.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel A. Merry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Joel A. Merry, Sheriff