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March 19, 2025

Testimony of Representative Grayson Lookner presenting

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

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Sailsbury, and honorable colleagues on the Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Grayson Lookner, and I represent House district 113 which includes part of Portland. I'm here today to present **LD 731, An Act to Prohibit Municipalities from Barring the Creation of Homeless Shelters.**

I'm proud to represent a district that contains two of the largest low barrier shelters for individuals experiencing homelessness in our state. My city has been home to sprawling encampments, and I routinely see unhoused neighbors camping in all seasons on public lands. Everyday, I am reminded of how the lack of resources and investment in housing contributes to the crisis in housing and homelessness that has been plaguing our state for too long.

Neighbors helping neighbors is a fundamental Maine value, and while my city and many other municipalities across Maine have been doing more than their fair share to provide solutions to the crisis in homelessness, others have not. When municipalities in Maine ban the creation of homeless shelters, it unfairly burdens other communities that have been doing their part.

There is a tremendous amount of stigma in the public around what causes homelessness, which contributes to municipalities passing harmful ordinances that prohibit emergency shelters. When I volunteered at the Preble Street resource center in 2018, I met a woman in her mid-60s who had become homeless after her husband died. She lost access to his VA benefits and her rent was increased. In fact, this story is illustrative of the number one

cause of people falling into homelessness, unaffordable housing. According to researchers from the University of Washington, high rents in a city are the number one predictor of homelessness, not mental illness, use of drugs, or criminal records. This is to say, that the stigma against those experiencing homelessness is a harmful and misguided stereotype.

This bill would very simply prevent municipalities from banning emergency shelters. It does not say how many emergency shelters that municipality will allow, where the municipality will locate the shelters, or mandate that the municipality spend any money to create these shelters. I'm a supporter of the home rule provision of the Maine Constitution, but when one municipality's exercise of home rule adversely affects everyone else, and requires other municipalities to increase taxes on their residents to provide for the neighbors that other municipalities have been neglecting, it creates problems for everyone that undermines home rule. If every town in the state steps up to do just a little bit, we greatly reduce the impacts of unsheltered homelessness all across Maine.

Together, we can solve the housing and homelessness crisis, but it's going to require everyone to do their part. Mainers stepping up to the plate to do their part for the community is part of what makes this state such a great and unique place to live, and this bill is only asking those municipalities with the ability to do just that: pull their weight.

Thank you for hearing my testimony, and I'm happy to answer any questions.