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Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in *Support* of LD 731, An Act to Prohibit Municipalities from Barring the Creation of Homeless Shelters

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Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and distinguished members of the Committee on State and Local Government. I'm Andrea Steward, (she/her/hers) a policy advocate at Maine Equal Justice nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 731.

LD 731 is a necessary and timely bill that prohibits municipalities from enacting or enforcing ordinances that prevent the establishment or operation of homeless shelters. In doing so, it ensures that no community can turn its back on individuals in need. As our state faces an ongoing housing crisis, it is imperative that we take every possible step to ensure all Mainers have access to safe and stable shelter.

Homelessness is not a personal failure; it is an inevitable result of systemic inequality and a housing market that leaves many struggling to make ends meet. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Mainers grappled with the challenge of affording rent. Today, the situation is even more dire. With wages failing to keep pace with rising housing costs, many households are living on the brink of homelessness. According to recent data, nearly 72% of extremely low-income households in Maine spend more than 30% of their income on rent, while over half are considered severely rent-burdened, paying more than 50% of their income toward housing costs.

The consequences of homelessness extend far beyond the individual. It is a public health issue, a public safety concern, and a matter of fundamental human dignity. Without stable shelter, individuals face increased rates of chronic illness, mental health challenges, and substance use disorders. Accessing essential services like healthcare and medication becomes nearly

impossible without a secure place to live. Moreover, the absence of shelter forces people to live in unsafe conditions, exposing them to the elements and heightening their vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

Encampments and unsheltered homelessness are not solutions—they are symptoms of a broken system. When municipalities restrict the creation of homeless shelters, they only exacerbate the problem. We know that providing shelter reduces the prevalence of encampments and decreases the strain on emergency services. For example, communities that added shelter beds in 2023 saw a measurable reduction in unsheltered homelessness by the end of the year. Shelters serve as a critical entry point to housing stability, connecting people to healthcare, case management, and recovery programs. Limiting the ability to establish shelters does not eliminate the need for them; it simply ties the hands of those working to address homelessness and forces people to live in unsafe and undignified conditions.

Homelessness affects entire communities. When people are left without shelter, the social and economic impacts ripple throughout the community. Stable housing reduces crime, improves public health outcomes, and lowers emergency service costs. Studies show that Housing First initiatives, which prioritize providing permanent housing combined with supportive services, are both humane and cost-effective. Providing stable shelter not only alleviates human suffering but also makes our communities safer and stronger.

Importantly, the need for shelter exists in every corner of our state. No municipality should be allowed to prevent the establishment of a homeless shelter, because homelessness is not confined to urban areas. Rural communities, too, face significant housing challenges, and the absence of shelter options leaves individuals and families with nowhere to turn.

LD 731 recognizes the shared responsibility we all have to care for our neighbors. Passing this bill will ensure that all Mainers, regardless of where they live, have access to shelter when they need it most. It will allow service providers to meet the growing demand for emergency housing and ensure that no one is left out in the cold due to municipal restrictions.

I urge you to support LD 731 and to take this critical step toward ending and preventing homelessness in Maine. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.