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March 25, 2025

Re: LD 748, An Act to Increase Bridging Rental Assistance Program Housing Voucher Funding to Reduce the Current Partial Waitlist and Increase Housing Vouchers for Those Living with Mental Health Challenges

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 with service providers across Maine to house hundreds of people experiencing homelessness, particularly people who are chronically homeless, victims of domestic violence, and homeless Veterans – all of whom require supportive housing, including recovery residences.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 748, An Act to Increase Bridging Rental Assistance Program Housing Voucher Funding to Reduce the Current Partial Waitlist and Increase Housing Vouchers for Those Living with Mental Health Challenges. *This bill increases funding for the Bridging Rental Assistance Program (\$660,000 in each year of the biennium) to reduce the waiting list for assistance and increase housing vouchers by addressing the increase in program costs resulting from a 2021 policy change that increased the portion of a participant's rent paid by the program.*

Maine has a shortage of Section 8 and other forms of rental assistance. Our waiting lists have been as high as 26,000 people, with some waiting for up to 10 years. And MaineHousing's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV – Section 8) Program has been frozen for months (at the direction of HUD) with no end in sight.

LD 748 would pave the way for the Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) to help move people, particularly people with serious and persistent mental illness, out of homelessness and into stability, something particularly important for this population.

Increasing funding for BRAP to address the waitlists, specifically for Priority 3 (homeless populations), would greatly assist emergency shelters and front-line staff move people from homelessness into housing. Prior to the creation of the waitlist, BRAP was instrumental in housing populations experiencing chronic homelessness. BRAP has historically been our most flexible resource to quickly move very vulnerable populations from homelessness to stability in housing.

On 3/21, DHHS announced that due to the unprecedented increase in rental rates and associated program costs and demand for the program, it would be instituting a full pause on BRAP for all priorities, effective Monday, 3/24. Maine needs additional BRAP funding now more than ever.

Getting people who are chronically homeless housed creates cost savings for local, county, and state governments. This population is 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 help us house people experiencing homelessness. Please increase funding for BRAP so that we have the resources to do so. This investment will pay dividends, as it will cost far less than the costs and health consequences of leaving this population unhoused. Let's work to create sound solutions, rooted in best practices, to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.