

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development - My name is David Beseda and since 1994 I have worked in affordable housing development and the operation of homeless shelters in Maine. The past several years I have worked with York County Shelter Programs located in the county seat, Alfred (also with a family emergency shelter in Sanford).

When I first read the publication of this legislation, I was quite enthusiastic for the potential that this funding could help with the survival of homeless shelters throughout Maine,

My planned in person testimony changed during the past few weeks because I am now involved in crisis planning meetings related to the closing of the largest homeless shelter in southern Maine (and the only shelter for homeless single adults in York County). York County Shelter Programs is now scheduled to close operations one week from today due to income losses and also the limited state funding available for the operation of homeless shelters.

York County Shelter Programs was established in 1980 by leaders of the community in York County, and it has annually served around 650 homeless men, women, and children from cities and towns across York County. Like other shelters across the state, York County Shelter Programs has operated an emergency shelter which combines support services for mental health issues, substance use treatment services, employment training, and assistance to help individuals and families move into affordable housing in the community.

In order to shelter up to 57 men and women in a 24-hour facility, significant funding is required for the two staff who work with clients during each of the three 8-hour shifts. Additionally, one or two trained social workers are needed to help stabilize shelter residents with mental health issues and experienced traumas.

Over the decades, it has been difficult to combine enough funding required for the shelter staffing and building operating expenses. York County Shelter Programs has obtained funds from Maine State Housing Authority, also from charitable donors, conducted fundraising events, and applied for foundation grants. But Maine State Housing Authority has acknowledged that the amount of state funding it can distribute only provides for about 30% of the actual costs required to staff and operate an emergency shelter.

Since the annual available funding from the state is limited, each year emergency shelters must raise several hundred thousand dollars to sustain the necessary staffing and operating costs. Costs continue to rise for heat, utilities, staff expenses, property and health insurance, food for the shelter residents, etc. York County Shelter Program experienced a widening gap between the rising operating expenses, and the limited availability of operating funds. With growing expenses/debt and a projected inability to continue to meet payroll and operating expenses, York County Shelter Programs came to the grim realization that it must effectuate a closing date. With the closing of York County Shelter Programs next Friday, there will be no emergency homeless shelter in the county of York, and 57 emergency shelter beds will be lost and not available to unhoused area residents.

Emergency shelters in Maine exist to offer basic life sustaining shelter and food to those Mainers who are the most vulnerable.

This legislation does arrive too late to maintain operations for the only homeless shelter in York County, but the funds collected for the purpose of this legislation will prevent other homeless shelters from closing and it may offer an opportunity for emergency sheltering services to be revived in York County in the future. Other emergency shelter organizations have shared with us that they are discussing how much longer they can afford to operate, and several worry that they are on the brink of closing their doors

The state of Maine has acknowledged, through research and reporting, that nearly 84,000 more units of housing are needed in the state to provide enough affordable housing. Many noteworthy efforts are taking place to create more affordable housing. But that increase in supply will take at least five years, and many Mainers will be left in an acute or chronic crisis without emergency shelters as a safety net. The proposed legislation and its funding could provide a stop-gap resource for several years until the development of the state's affordable housing can catch up with the need.

The proposed funding source for this legislation seems extremely reasonable in its scope and tremendously unremarkable as any real burden or impact upon the source of funding. Research would confirm that two dollars per booking (less than a cup of coffee) for a hotel, or an RV camping site or a short-term rental is an insignificant cost to the consumer and would not deter any individual or family from a planned or unplanned vacation or business stay.

Additionally, this minor fee does correlate with the experience of vacation or business travel in Maine.

Families and individuals on vacation, or on business trips, do not find comfort in the experience of homeless encampments, nor in the sidewalk encounters that mean sidestepping the suffering of homeless men, women, and children in our community.

The industries administering the collection of these fees may feel that it is an undue burden on their enterprises and clientele. But in reality, it would benefit business because if emergency shelters can continue to exist, the impact of homelessness will not mean that there are unhoused people who have no choice but to live in public spaces. Both Mainers and visitors to Maine are, for the most part, caring and compassionate, and I believe the users of hotels, campgrounds, and short-term rentals would support such a meager fee when that expense will provide critical support for necessary operating costs of emergency homeless shelters.

If more homeless shelters close, the need for such emergency housing will not decrease, in fact it is a growing community and individual problem.

Thank you for your time, and for your consideration of those experiencing homelessness in Maine. I am happy to answer any questions.

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