

Testimony in Support of LD 1910, *An Act to Strengthen Housing Stability Services by Increasing Support and Outreach*

Submitted by Jena Jones, Representative of Region III, Statewide Homeless Council

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Greetings Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee. My name is Jena Jones and I have the privilege of representing Region III on Maine's Statewide Homeless Council (SHC). It is the duty of the SHC to advise the Governor, the Legislature, and others on matters related to addressing, ending, and preventing homelessness. Today I write in strong support for LD 1910, *An Act to Strengthen Housing Stability Services by Increasing Support and Outreach*.

As the northernmost territory of the state, Region III includes all of Piscataquis, Penobscot, Hancock, Washington, and Aroostook counties. The area is geographically vast and economically diverse with sprawling rural spaces and few resource hubs. It is an area where challenges to accessing necessary resources to end one's experience of homelessness are considerable. Factors like rising poverty, few economic opportunities, the current housing crisis, shifting population dynamics, and a chronic underinvestment in mental health and substance use services are eroding the bedrock of the homeless response system, and the pipeline that is the continuum of care to access homeless services and supports has stagnated.

We have been seeing the impacts of this stagnation for some time: emergency shelter beds are full across Maine and the average number of nights folks are staying in shelter prior to exiting to housing continues to creep up. As such we see the visible effects of this imbalance of resources in the rise of unsheltered homelessness and encampments across the state as rough sleepers try to find a safe spot to stay. These folks are most often the hardest to reach given the increase in anti-camping policies that results in frequent movement as they are commonly displaced by law enforcement.

In addition to an overfull shelter system, housing subsidies, a vital component of ending someone's experience of homelessness, are infrequently available, if at all. Further compounding the issue, a shift in demographic data has revealed that more and more older adults are experiencing homelessness for the first time in their 70's, 80's, and 90's. As Maine has the oldest median age in the country, this is deeply alarming. Turmoil at the federal level adds another shade of uncertainty service providers are already experiencing. Following the end of pandemic-era supports that buoyed many

programs, providers across the state are now facing the tightening, and even shuttering, of services. Recent staggering cuts within the federal government only add to our concerns.

The challenges we currently face require such resource-intensive solutions that we are spending so much time pulling people out of the proverbial river rather than preventing them from falling in in the first place. Though not a silver bullet, LD 1910 will aid our collective ability to pull more people out of the river - and to help more folks to not fall in. One of the brightest spots in this work are the relationships built between folks experiencing homelessness and the workers helping to pull people out of the river.

Accessing the homeless services continuum can be a daunting maze to navigate - more so if you're also experiencing barriers like mental health or substance use challenges. For many, the experience of homelessness is a relatively brief and singular event - but for people experiencing chronic homelessness, for a year or more, overcoming that experience is impossible without help. The people providing that help, the outreach and housing workers like LD 1910 would provide, hold hope for the people they guide to safer, more stable spaces.

One of the biggest challenges someone experiencing homelessness in Maine right now faces is connecting to the worker who will act as that guide - particularly as many people who are chronically unhoused require solutions that meet them where they are. LD 1910 will increase the opportunity for those connections to hope and positive change at a time when it is desperately needed. The trusted relationships built between someone who is unhoused and the workers who support them are the vehicles that end homelessness - all of the important work is done in that space. Within that bond skills are built that help an individual create lasting changes and prevent recurrences of homelessness.

I implore you to aid our collective ability to meaningfully impact homelessness by voting in favor of LD 1910. This is another tool in the box at a time when investment in proven solutions is required. Thank you for your consideration.