

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chip Leighton

President

Yemaya St. Clair

Vice President

Joann Bautista

Secretary

Justin Rosner

Treasurer

Becca Asen

Terry Davies

Chris Ellingwood

Lauren Gauthier

Joe Ingream

Christopher Pyne

John Roberts

Elaine Rosen

Maurice A. Selinger III

Terry Sutton

Jay Tansey

Lannie Welch

Mark R. Swann

Executive Director

55 Portland Street

Portland, ME 04101

207.775.0026

info@preblestreet.org

www.preblestreet.org

United Way
of Southern MaineCHARITY
NAVIGATOR
Four Star Charity

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committees on Appropriations and Housing and Economic Development,

My name is Mark Swann, and I am the Executive Director at Preble Street. The mission of Preble Street is to provide accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty, and to advocate for solutions to these problems. Preble Street's 164 shelter beds at four emergency shelters in Portland and Bangor are full almost every single night of the year to meet the needs of vulnerable Mainers. More than 500 individuals from all 16 counties in Maine used our shelters last year.

I am writing today to urge you to support funding for shelters in the supplemental budget. The \$1.5 million in part A (page 78) of the supplemental budget will help stabilize our homeless response system and keep life-saving shelter beds open from Presque Isle to Sanford. In the last session, this legislature allocated one-time funding to shelters statewide, providing critical relief to a system facing ever-rising costs and longer stays due to housing shortages and other barriers. Without that funding, hundreds more Mainers would have been sleeping outside this winter.

Emergency shelters play a critical role in our communities and offer so much more than just a bed and a meal. Shelters connect people to life-saving services, such as healthcare, case management, and recovery programs. They support people in finding employment and are often the first step toward long-term housing. Shelters also divert the most vulnerable from relying on the most expensive services, such as hospital emergency rooms, jails, police, emergency response systems, and the child welfare system.

Just like everything else, the cost of operating a shelter and keeping the people who need it safe and supported continues to increase. Last spring, the York County Adult Shelter closed, placing an even greater strain on the remaining shelters in Maine. And Bangor's Hope House is only open today because a year ago, Preble Street assumed operations after learning that financial considerations would lead to the closure of that shelter and its 56 beds. Any further loss of shelter beds leaves even more people without a safe, warm place to sleep and causes human suffering. But with permanent, sustainable funding for Maine's shelter system, we can prevent that suffering.

I want to introduce you to a few people whose shelter stays were turning points in their journey to secure housing and stability. Landon had been living unsheltered in the Portland area for seven years. During that time, he had frequent interactions with law enforcement and was well known in the neighborhood as a challenging person to interact with. Once he began staying at Elena's Way Wellness Shelter, that changed. Almost immediately, his demeanor softened, and he engaged calmly with his caseworkers and fellow shelter guests. He got a job in construction. After only four months of working closely with his caseworker, he moved into his own apartment, where he is continuing to do well. For Landon, a stable place to rest his head each night, steady casework and services, and a healing environment made all the difference. Now he faces a brighter future and no longer impacts the city's emergency response resources. This is a personal, community, and systems win.

Dana grew up in the foster care system and became homeless as a teen. She had severe behavioral issues and a substance use disorder. She was unhoused and engaging in risky behaviors when she became pregnant in her twenties. At this time, she began staying at Elena's Way, where a stable environment and casework support allowed her to begin

treatment for her substance use disorder and get regular prenatal care. Thanks to her time in shelter, she has now been housed and sober for two years, and after turning her life around, is in the final steps of reuniting with her daughter. She is planning to break the cycle for her child.

Landon and Dana's stories illustrate a broader truth that housing navigators and social workers know: helping someone stabilize and develop a plan to exit homelessness is significantly easier when they are staying in a shelter. A recent California study found that unsheltered individuals experienced homelessness for twice as long as those who were in emergency shelters. Unsheltered people were less than half as likely as individuals staying in shelters to have received housing navigation support in the past 6 months. While we work to create permanent, long-term housing and homelessness solutions, it is important to recognize that shelters often serve as steppingstones toward housing. Without them, the solutions that we are all working toward become much harder to put in place.

Every day, the professional staff at Preble Street sees the life-changing impact that consistent shelter access and connection to services can have for people experiencing homelessness. Youth fleeing violence can find safety and healing, people with chronic health conditions can better manage their health, and individuals can more easily maintain employment.

We respectfully urge the committees to support the long-term sustainability of our state's homelessness response system by including funding for shelters in the FY 2026–27 Supplemental Budget.

Thank you for your time and consideration.