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United Way  
of Greater Portland



Good Morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Henry Meyer and I am the Director of Preble Street's Elena's Way Wellness Shelter in Portland and ask that you vote in support of LD599. I'd like to start with telling you something about the 40 individuals who stay there and what makes this program unique in Maine.

Elena's Way provides warmth, nourishment, safety, care and comprehensive services 24-hours/day, 7 days per week, for the most vulnerable individuals who are experiencing homelessness in Portland. They are individuals who have been banned from or are unable to access other shelters and have been living outside. They are the individuals who you may have seen sleeping in doorways, laid out on the cold ground, or hidden in tents behind shopping centers, alongside rivers and highways.

They struggle with complex medical needs, histories of trauma, and untreated substance use and mental health disorders.

Elena's Way has a men's sleeping area, a women's sleeping area and a sleeping area for couples. We welcome couples because we know that couples who are afraid to separate is a leading cause of unsheltered homelessness in America. At Elena's Way, individuals can access their beds whenever they want. We find that people who have been living outside spend a lot of their initial time at Elena's Way sleeping. They finally feel safe enough to do that.

Today you'll receive testimony from a wide range of community health care providers, small business owners and neighbors of Elena's Way, clergy and clients themselves. Please look for those important testimonies in your materials as many were unable to testify in person. They will all speak to the good that Elena's Way has brought to the community.

Elena's Way is not a typical shelter. It is different. The program - this model - benefits the entire community as well as the clients who have stayed there, including:

Sam, who is a friendly, kind fifty-year-old man who connected with the Preble Street Outreach Team while living in a half-collapsed tent in the woods of Portland. His foot was infected to the point where it was at risk of being amputated. Sam was unable to seek medical care, because doing so would mean leaving his tent and campsite unattended, and he would be at risk of losing all of his survival gear. Sam wouldn't stay in shelters because he found them overcrowded and chaotic, triggering unbearable anxiety. After building a relationship with the Outreach Team, Sam took the leap and accepted a spot at Elena's Way. The first thing he did when he got

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there was sleep. He rested for several days and then took another leap: he admitted himself to the hospital to get his infected foot treated. With his foot healed, and with staff support, he was able to get approved for an apartment. He is now waiting to sign a lease and move in.

Mary is a tiny thin young woman who dances around Elena's Way responding to internal stimuli. She moves to the tv screen where an animal show is playing and stands inches from it speaking to the animals, pointing all over and never stops moving, even when she's standing in one place. Eventually she is drawn to a table where staff have laid out nail care items with various colors of polish. Mary paints her fingernails a bright yellow. Her hands shake and her body regularly contorts in jerky, spastic movements as she laughs and mixes nonsensical language with a conversation she tries to have with staff. The yellow nail polish mixes with the dirt covering her small fingers and contrasts with old, dried blood on her hand.

She is unable to speak coherently for more than a brief sentence. This is her baseline. She is endearing to staff. She keeps to herself, but cannot sit still, moving constantly around the shelter. Her behavior is not challenging yet she cannot be redirected. Elena's Way keeps her warm, stable, and safe, and this allows her to have the weekly contacts with her behavioral health provider so she can access medication.

"Sarah", a 73-year-old woman who had been camping outside with her husband "Ben". Sarah was born and raised in Acton, and is a self-described "country girl", with long silver hair and the strong cheekbones and amber eyes of her full-blooded Mic Mac father who lived with Sarah until he passed away at 99 years old. Sarah and Ben had been tenting out in the woods in Scarborough for a long time when our Street Outreach Collaborative team came across them while bringing hot food to the encampments. Sarah and Ben are sleeping in the couples dorm so they can be close to each other.

Mike is a double amputee that has a serious substance use disorder. He has been unsheltered for a very long time. Mike can often be found sleeping in his wheelchair with his upper body fallen across his bed. Staff report that he is under the influence almost all of his waking time. He needs to frequently leave the warmth of the shelter as his addiction tortures him, driving him outside into the dark in search of anything that numbs his pain.

"Susan" was born and raised in Auburn and speaks of many happy memories of her childhood. She loved school and especially did well in English, her favorite subject. She is proud that her great aunt taught English at Edward Little High School. Susan worked for years as a manager at several Hannaford stores and 7-Elevens. She first became homeless at 42 and found herself on the streets of Portland. She struggles with severe alcoholism and has suffered much trauma on the street. She uses a wheelchair and has complex medical needs. In the first week of being sheltered at Elena's Way, she had difficulty toileting herself and needed staff assistance in cleaning up. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of staying at Elena's Way, she went to an AA meeting. Last summer she spent most nights in Deering Oaks and had daily encounters with Portland Police. After coming into

Elena's Way, the local police behavioral liaison shared that since then Susan has had zero police encounters.

John, 40 and homeless since the onset of the pandemic, has spent most of the past few years unsheltered and living outside. He has co-occurring diagnoses of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Substance Use Disorder, and these symptoms have interfered with his ability to access existing shelters. He walks paces back and forth across Elena's Way and compulsively checks through the trash can. A few months back, John was able to access a hotel room through ERA funding but was soon asked to leave after he attempted to replace the carpet in his room because it "was dirty." John's showers at Elena's Way often last a couple hours, but with patience, grace, and compassion, staff are able to find a way to make him successful at Elena's Way. It is not easy.

In their time at Elena's Way, many clients have demonstrated behaviors that would certainly have gotten them restricted from conventional shelters. Staff at Elena's Way are trained and prepared to respond to these situations. We create a trauma informed space and employ social work best practices, and the results have been profound.

Preble Street opened Elena's Way when the pandemic kept most people home and safe. While assessing what was most desperately needed in the community at that time, we noted that you couldn't drive anywhere in Portland without seeing unhoused and unsheltered people who could no longer hide in the back cubicle at a library, or on a bench in the ferry terminal, or on a good day having a slow cup of coffee in a local shop or on a bad day, being arrested and brought to jail on a public nuisance charge. COVID changed all our lives.

When we looked at the most dire need in our community and asked "Where is the gap?" It didn't take us long to answer - providing shelter for those with complex medical, behavioral and/or substance use needs who couldn't access shelter elsewhere.

We knew that for our whole community to be safe the most medically vulnerable people living outside needed to be safe. So we opened Elena's Way.

Knowing that these fragile and ill individuals qualified for MaineCare services, the State Department of Health and Human Services spent two years working with us to help find any available funding for Elena's Way. We became a licensed mental health program so Medicaid could be billed ensuring that available federal funding wouldn't be left on the table.

Outside of that, Elena's Way expects to receive a small amount of regular funding from Maine Housing's Emergency Shelter Housing Assistance Program, General Assistance and United Way of Southern Maine, leaving a huge gap in funding that is needed to keep this program operating. Preble Street works hard every year to raise private dollars, but we are unable to raise the level of funding needed for this program that targets and shelters the most severely ill individuals who have nowhere else to go.

Not only is this vital program humane, it saves dollars. Our law enforcement and emergency response partners tell us this program makes significant differences in their work and is such an improvement. Investing in this will prevent costs in the emergency response system. Then the

costs will not be in the streets, not in police calls, not in the hospital emergency rooms, not in jails, not in ambulances, not in morgues.

We ask that you accept Representative Brennan's amendment as the success we have seen in Elena's Way needs to be replicated in Maine communities where there are unsheltered people unable to access conventional shelters and living outside in unsafe and unacceptable conditions. This pilot is good for communities.

Please vote "ought to pass" on LD 599.

Thank you.



**Shelter is a human right and emergency shelters are a vital element of the public health infrastructure. When designed and operated using both preventive medicine and social work best practices, emergency shelters are uniquely situated to promote the health and wellness of individuals accessing services as well as the surrounding community.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that emergency shelters play a critically important role in a community's public health and need to be smaller, wide open, ensure a welcoming and calm environment, and be staffed by social work professionals.

Informed by a response to the COVID-19 emergency, **Elena's Way, a Preble Street Wellness Shelter**, is an ongoing part of the solution to homelessness and provides warmth, safety, and intensive services for up to 40 men and women experiencing homelessness and complex health and behavioral issues who cannot access any other shelter. It serves as a first step on the path to site-based Housing First or other housing.

As we work to end homelessness in Maine and ensure people experiencing homelessness are treated with dignity and respect, we need to invest in better shelters. The Elena's Way Wellness Shelter is a model for what future shelters could, and should, be.

## **What is a Wellness Shelter?**

A Wellness Shelter is a 24-hour, service-inclusive, and trauma-informed emergency shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness that is grounded in social work and medical best practices.

A Wellness Shelter provides a therapeutic environment for those accessing services to heal, rest, and stabilize as they connect with trained social work staff to pursue casework goals related to housing, healthcare, employment, and community integration.

*"I am absolutely grateful I can finally sleep and feel safe. I feel safe here. I hadn't felt safe in a very long time."*

**– One of the first clients to stay at Elena's Way, a Preble Street Wellness Shelter**



A Wellness Shelter offers:

**A Healing Environment:** Through shelter design and operational policies and procedures, a Wellness Shelter aims to create a healthy, therapeutic, and trauma-informed environment. In addition to yielding improved casework outcomes for those that access services, research has shown that the behaviors of mental health and substance use disorders can be reduced or eliminated in an environment that is healing and restorative.

**Personal Space:** Created in consultation with medical experts, the layout, design, and operational workflows of a Wellness Shelter maximize personal space. High ceilings and general spaciousness provide a sense of calm and quiet that is atypical of traditional shelter settings. Social distancing is incorporated into all aspects of shelter design and beds are at least six feet apart. This space not only mitigates the spread of contagious diseases, like COVID-19, but also positively impacts emotional health.

**Comprehensive Services:** Professional casework, meals, laundry, storage, and mail are all offered on-site, maximizing the ability of those accessing services to stay within the program and reducing the need for unnecessary trips to-and-from the shelter to meet basic needs. This is not only beneficial from a preventative medicine standpoint, but also promotes opportunities for rest and healing among a population that is significantly more prone to physical and mental health conditions. Collaborations with mental health, substance use, and medical providers are actively pursued, and these caregivers are welcomed into the shelter setting and invited to "meet people where they're at."

**Empowerment:** A Wellness Shelter promotes individual agency, offering opportunities for choices that empower those accessing services to be the decision-makers about how to best meet their needs. Unlike traditional shelter environments, a Wellness Shelter provides access to beds at all hours of the day, allowing individuals to rest whenever needed. Similarly, nutritious food is always available, promoting choice and minimizing the need for lines or crowding. These operational plans are created intentionally to negate the common theme within homeless services where those who access resources are forced to compete for limited supplies.

**Professional Social Work Staff:** All shelter staff are trained in social work assessment and use established social work best practices in their approaches, interactions, and interventions. The principles of harm reduction, client-centered care, and strengths-based social work are essential tools for staff and critical to establishing the trauma-informed and therapeutic environment distinctive of a Wellness Shelter. This helps to mitigate behavioral issues related to mental health and substance use disorders and allows individuals who may not access or succeed in traditional shelter environments to achieve stability in a Wellness Shelter setting.