



Joseph E. Rafferty
Senator, District 34

THE MAINE SENATE
131st Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Joe Rafferty Presenting
LD 1609, An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness
Before the Senate Committee on Housing

Friday, April 21, 2023

Good morning Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. My name is Joe Rafferty and I proudly represent the people of Senate District 34 including Berwick, North Berwick, Wells, Kennebunk and Kennebunkport.

I am here today to present LD 1609, “An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness.” This bill would provide essential support to our most vulnerable students who are experiencing housing instability.

First, please accept my apologies for taking so long to put substance to my concept draft. Student homelessness is a difficult matter and I wanted to capture the need with a direction and assistance that will make a difference moving forward.

In our state, over 73% of evictions in Maine occur as a result of less than \$1300 in outstanding costs, which highlights the precarious financial situations that many families in our state are facing. Additionally, we have seen a rise in student homelessness, with 2,186 students experiencing housing-insecurity in 2023. This is a significant increase from just five years ago when that figure was 1,405, and it is essential that we address this very difficult part of the housing crisis.

I can share that we already have the infrastructure in place through our schools to do this: The McKinney-Vento program has been ongoing in Maine since the 1980s and today there is a liaison in every school who is trained to support housing-insecure students and their ability to learn. They are tasked with identifying need in each district.

In recognition of the extraordinary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students experiencing homelessness, the American Rescue Plan included a fund for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, specifically for Homeless Children and Youth. State educational agencies and local educational agencies could use these funds to identify homeless children and youth, to provide homeless children and youth with wrap-around services to address the challenges facing families, and to enable homeless children and youth to attend school and fully participate in school activities. Maine received \$2.6 million to support homeless children and youth, which has allowed McKinney-Vento liaisons in Maine school districts to provide more support to students in need. From everything you’ll hear today, this fund has been life-saving. But this fund expires in September 2024.



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That is why LD 1609 proposes the creation of the Maine Student Homelessness Prevention fund, a two-year pilot program that can be accessed by McKinney-Vento liaisons in efforts to prevent student homelessness. This fund would be available to school leaders in their efforts to provide resources for families in need, up to \$750 per student, for such needs as back rent, utilities payment, repairs, short emergency hotel stays beyond the two nights schools can offer, security deposits, transportation expenses, and miscellaneous wrap-around services.

I'd like to share a story that's ongoing as I speak. On Thursday, March 23rd, my wife was at school for her parent teacher conference night. She was having a typical conversation with the mom of one of her students about a change she recognized in the woman's 16 year-old daughter's behavior. Nothing bad, it was just that the girl had been falling asleep in class. The mom burst into tears and went on to explain that the family was struggling and would be homeless on April 1st. The winter rental they were in was turning into housing for incoming summer help for one of the local restaurants.

The mom went on to explain that she had recently been hospitalized nine days with a rare form of cancer. Sometime before that, while working managing a kitchen, her boss called the staff to a meeting. He announced the business was closing.

I can't grasp the state of mind she was in while facing all of this. As you might guess, we became involved. Her two daughters, one in high school, the other in middle school, were trying to cope as best kids can when they're worried sick. The oldest couldn't sleep at home. While her mother was hospitalized, the oldest was too scared to sleep. School was her comfort zone! She knew she was safe there. That is why she was sleeping in class.

Collectively, we got the school involved that Friday. The McKinney-Vento Liaison laid out some options, although housing was the main concern. There was no availability locally. Over the weekend, we privately considered taking them in. We struggled and did our best trying to separate our emotions from helping them navigate the system. By providing a roof, they wouldn't qualify for services necessary to help them find their own place.

That Monday, March 27, the mom and I met with the town's GA coordinator. The Mom could apply, but her situation could not be labeled as "emergency" until they were literally living in their car. Without an emergency label, a shelter would be a long wait. She explained other options including the mom applying to SSDI based on her health issues and new inability to work. It was also stated that is a lengthy process and that you will be denied the first time through and will need to reapply. It could take a year or more. Privately, my mind was racing and I was wondering *how could this be?* That week was a rough one for all of us. It was all my wife and I could think about. By Friday, March 31, their last day in the apartment, we were notified by the district's liaison, the family could stay the weekend



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in a local hotel. He had funds for two nights. By 2:00 AM Saturday, April 1st, they were packed up, moved and settled. I went home. I stirred all night worrying. What will we do on Sunday?

Sunday came and the liaison notified us that he'd come up with emergency funds that could carry them for a stretch, although that was undefined. Through this, they were able to stay there for twenty days.

On my ride home yesterday, I was told this family is homeless as of today at 11:00. Apparently, there's a one day gap in availability to get into the next location. For \$130, a void LD 1609 could address, they could've stayed another night where they are warm and comfortable and avoided spending the night in their car. On a school night. There is no LD 1609 yet, but overnight, our community secured funds to ensure this family is safe until Saturday and they will move over the weekend.

At this point, I know this family is relocating to a neighboring community, the kids will finish at their current schools and register at their "new school" for September. There are numerous challenges ahead but some gears are connecting. The receiving community has support available and are very willing to help.

It is hard for us to understand what being homeless looks like. The story I've shared made it very real to me and my instinct to help puts me before you this morning.

This fund would have a significant impact on our ability to prevent student homelessness and ensure that our most vulnerable students have access to the resources they need to succeed in school. The use of funds would be reported in the same way liaisons currently report, adding no additional burden on school administrators.

As someone who cares deeply about the education and well-being of our students, I urge you to support LD 1609. By providing schools with the resources needed to serve every student when their family is facing a crisis situation caused by housing instability, we can prevent student homelessness and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I will take any questions you might have.