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United Way  
of Southern Maine



Hello Senator Baldacci, Senator Meyer, and honorable members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Caroline Fernandes. I am the Director of Health Services for Preble Street. I am here today in support of LD 1781 because I have seen firsthand for two years how successful HOUSE has been and the potential we have to change the lives of more Mainers. Through the HOUSE program, Preble Street and our partner Greater Portland Health have worked with 49 individuals, connected 100% of participants with Medical Assisted Treatment, Mental, Behavioral, and Medical Care, and offered all intensive case management, including housing services.

It has been a profound experience to participate in and guide the social work services of clients in HOUSE. From Day One, it was clear we had been granted permission to support people in an unprecedented way, including wraparound medical services, intensive case management, and the funding needed to get results.

Through HOUSE, the Preble Street Health Services team has been able to take time to outreach individuals known to be the most vulnerable in our community, who had not been successfully served by existing substance use treatment models. To have the flexibility to spend time sitting with, driving with, and searching for individuals; in many cases, unsheltered individuals who were using opioids, who were vulnerable to overdose, and whose experience with treatment, medical care, and SYSTEMS historically had been that of stigmatization, suspicion, and judgment. People who understandably could be hesitant to say, "I'm in!" because that would mean trusting, connecting with hope, and believing we were not going to disappear, judge, or withhold services when things got bad. We had to ask people to believe that we were going to hold true to the Harm Reduction model of looking at what was better rather than what wasn't perfect.

We were granted time and money that allowed us to meet people where they are. It is a privilege it is to walk alongside a person who has mustered the courage to say, "I will try something new."

Many people receiving services under HOUSE have told us they don't know that they would be here if it weren't for the support they have received. Some have reconnected with family, are doing Harm Reduction advocacy work and are volunteering. And 27 are housed. More than half of the people we worked with are safe and in housing.

The successes have been mind-boggling. There is a saying that 'housing is healthcare' and our Health Services team has witnessed this saying become reality many times over the past two years. Many things can come to the forefront for individuals when the stress of the streets subsides and there is quiet and a lock on your door. Being confronted by the things pushed down and put on hold for years while surviving can be overwhelming especially when you think 'Everything is going to be great once I have a home.' But the entire team of HOUSE has been able to support people through the transition from the streets to a home.

We learned a great deal in two years. We learned that this unique model is successful for supporting vulnerable Mainers in moving toward hope, safety, housing, and recovery. And at a time when Maine is setting new record highs every year for fatal overdoses, it is clear that there is need for this proven successful model in this state. And we learned many lessons. Some of the most important lessons we learned, which are now reflected in LD1781, are:

- Most, if not all, of the vulnerable individuals we served through HOUSE used several different types of drugs, often what was available in a moment. Expanding the diagnoses and allowable treatment modalities beyond opioid use and suboxone treatment ensures access to all the proper care options for people who are facing substance use disorder.
- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned that individuals benefited most by having the ability to work with their doctor on the best and most effective treatment plan for themselves.
- And we learned that for some the path to a Recovery Residence or Sober House through a Rehabilitation Residence stay was going to place them on the best trajectory for successful recovery. The waitlist for a MaineCare Rehab bed can be months. Funding for inpatient settings ensures that the person's recovery is not delayed or set off course entirely by having to spend additional months on the streets.

I am eternally grateful for these past two years. The hope I have seen ignited. The joy I have seen and the sometimes-painful healing that was necessary to go through. I am permanently changed for the honor to walk alongside courageous people daring to change and daring to reidentify themselves as hopeful and healing. And I am eternally grateful to you for considering moving this important bill forward for the next 49 people in the state of Maine ready for something new. Thank you.