

H.O.M.E. Inc.

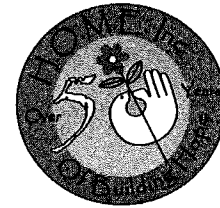
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"Serve First Those Who Suffer Most"
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Monday, January 22, 2024
Testimony in Support of LD 2136

Good afternoon, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members of the Housing Committee,

My name is Tracey Hair, and I am the Executive Director at H.O.M.E. Inc., a nonprofit human service agency operating four homeless shelters in Hancock County. We represent one of five shelters in the state serving families of all types, including families with children, which according to last year's Point in Time Count, make up almost 45% of the population experiencing homelessness.

We have been doing this work since 1970 and I have been with the organization for nineteen years. H.O.M.E.'s shelters are seeing higher levels of disability, including mental illness, anxiety, physical health needs, and an increasingly aged population delivered to our shelter door by law enforcement. Additionally, for the first time in my nineteen years working in Hancock County, encampments are becoming more common.

In 2021, \$10 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding was allocated to shelters and this funding temporarily allowed us to continue to provide safe, effective emergency housing through the pandemic. **This indeed rescued us.** Following that, this committee played a key role in the one-time \$5 million emergency shelter funding that was included in the Governor's budget, and that assistance meant for us, maintaining safe staffing patterns for the budget year, for the people we serve, it meant having access to quality homeless services in their time of need. We are grateful for that support. While the one-time funding was critically important, it was one-time funding spread among thirty-nine shelters around the state.

Prior to 2021, H.O.M.E. didn't have overnight and weekend coverage at three of its four shelters. Full-time staff didn't have health insurance and staffing patterns required one resident aide to travel across three shelters during their shift. A result of this dangerously inadequate staffing pattern were poor performance numbers, increased incidences of violence and tragically one suicide in the shelter during overnight hours.

Today, I'm raising the alarm, we are still in crisis. At a time when homelessness is taking hold across Maine and when encampments have popped up in rural and urban areas throughout the state, Maine's critically important shelters are at substantial risk of failing. Last year, our organization provided over 15,000 bed nights, an increase of 6083 bed nights over the year prior. People are staying longer, and more people are coming in. In fact, we have experienced a 182% increase in bed nights provided since 2021.

While we have worked to meet the challenges of increased occupancy as well as standards of care demands, we have also seen food and janitorial supply costs go up dramatically - our oil bill alone across the four buildings has increased by 40% this year. In the face of **rising costs and flat or decreased funding**, we are forced to make conservative decisions regarding personnel, leaving fewer frontline staff to work with increased numbers of clients with higher levels of need.

As a person who experienced homelessness for most of my childhood, **it's hard to shake the feeling that the front-line workforce responsible for housing Mainers experiencing homelessness, are being set up to fail.**

Our work has never had stable or sufficient resources to sustain skilled and experienced staff, yet skilled and experienced staff are the key ingredient to providing safe, emergency shelter services. In fact, despite what we were able to accomplish with COVID relief funds – our organization has no secure funding to **maintain this pace** in perpetuity and we are looking at a future of chronic understaffing and an **insurmountable shelter budget deficit**. All of this threatens the closure or reduction of shelter beds in our region and makes unhoused Mainers more vulnerable, and none of this helps end homelessness.

Can we imagine for a moment, finding ourselves homeless for the first time, and attempting to access a shelter in Maine, only to find that the shelter doesn't have space or resources to serve them? We are at a turning point in Maine - we must decide –do Mainers deserve to know that a shelter is ready for them when they fall on tough times? I think we all agree on that – if that is the case, we must invest accordingly.

The emergency shelter network in Maine provides the most effective and cost-efficient way to connect people experiencing homelessness to the services and supports they need to stay safe and get re-housed. With investments such as the one proposed I think Mainers experiencing homelessness can be served well by this budget. The investments we propose are basic – we need Mainers to continue to have access to shelter in a housing emergency– in a bad economy, that would be a good thing. Please consider an increase of \$10 million to support basic operations of shelters across Maine.

Thank you for your interest, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,



Tracey Hair
Executive Director