

Testimony of York County Shelter Programs
In support of
LD 2136 An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelter for Unhoused Individual

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Housing: thank you for having me and for your service to the State of Maine. My name is Megan Gean-Gendron and I am the proud Executive Director of York County Shelter Programs – a 45-year old comprehensive homelessness prevention agency and home to York County's only adult and family shelter.

I am here today to testify in support of LD 2136 in an effort to keep shelters across the state from closing their doors in the coming months. I had dreams of wowing you with testimony about the wonderful people that we serve – people who have been forgotten and overlooked by so many – and their incredible stories of grit, determination, fortitude, and strength. But I am afraid that what I have to focus on today, before all of you, is that we are at a crossroads in this state and on the brink of complete crisis. Shelters across the state are in operating deficits due to a lack of state funding to support shelter operations and some will only remain open a number of months at this point before closing due to a lack of funding.

York County Shelter Programs is no different as we are funded through the state at 35% of what it costs to operate the adult and family shelters, meaning we need to fundraise to find the other 65% of our budget. And I want to be clear and honest with this committee, York County Shelter Programs is currently in operation today due to the fact that a longtime supporter of ours passed away and left us enough money to get through this fiscal year. That's right, our county's only homeless shelter, in one of the wealthiest counties in the state, is only in operation today because a very kind and generous person died. That money should be going to capacity building and innovative programs. But instead it is helping us to stay alive so that York County's only shelter can remain open.

In the past four years businesses have seen costs steadily increase – the same is true for shelters: it simply costs more to operate today than it did four years ago. Yet the funding model has not changed at all. Add to that the simple fact that during the pandemic the number of unhoused individuals and families skyrocketed in Maine, increasing the need to an even greater point for an already stressed shelter system. York County Shelter Programs has seen an increase in costs of 33% from four years ago. That 33% includes costs such as staffing, electricity, fuel, food, water/sewer, and food costs.

In York County, we have a low estimate of 300 people currently unsheltered while all existing shelter beds are currently full. People – including individuals, families, and youth – who do not have shelter or access to other essential resources are not able to pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. Without adequate shelter and in the daily grind to simply survive, it is nearly impossible for folks to focus on anything but surviving one hour at a time. It is harder to gain or maintain employment – where would you shower before work? Where will your phone calls come into without an ability to charge your phone, if you even have one? How do you get enough sleep when you are sleeping in a tent or a car when it is 15° outside? How do you cook a meal for your child while living in a car or tent? What would you say to your child who is crying that they are too cold? The simple fact that anywhere in this great state we have people living outside should be cause for panic. But we have hundreds, at least. This is a crisis. We do not have enough shelter beds in this state and even if there was an opportunity to expand those beds to get folks off the streets, our shelters are on the brink of closure because they are funded at 35% of what it costs to operate at current capacity.

In York County, for instance, if York County Shelter Programs were to close, 542 more people would become unhoused:

- 542- that's the number of people JUST in York County, who would be without housing should YCSP financially collapse. Including:
 - 420 - that's the number of people who were formerly homeless and now living in YCSP owned permanent housing who would lose their home should YCSP collapse.
 - 20 - that's the number of families who would be without the safety of our family shelter
 - 24 - that's the current number of people who are seeking treatment for substance use disorders, who would lose access to their programming and support network
 - 44 - the number of individuals who were outside two months ago but are safe from the elements due to YCSP opening a warming center to address the urgent needs in encampments
 - 37 - that's the number of people currently working with our staff to move from shelter to permanent housing who would be stranded in the system if it breaks down.

The numbers I just read represent veterans who have served our country with honor, a parent with children escaping a domestic violence situation, and elderly citizens who can no longer afford both their housing and their medication.

Shelters heard the call and have shown up to meet the needs of those in their communities in the aftermath of the pandemic. Now we are asking for our call to action to be answered: we are in trouble. We are on the brink of closure and what shelters need right now to prevent a huge collapse across the system is additional funding for operations.

As I finish this testimony, I want to take a moment to recognize shelters across this great state. I am not sure that anyone can truly appreciate what an incredible group of experts we have running our shelters throughout the State of Maine. These are the experts in preventing homelessness, these are the experts who can tell you what folks experiencing homelessness need. And these are the experts who are up to the challenge that shelters face during this unprecedented time. We know what needs to be done to help folks from that moment they take the first scary step into a homeless shelter. THAT moment is where the journey begins. Anyone can fill up a shelter, but the hard work is addressing what caused that person to walk through those doors in the first place, so that we can help prevent that from happening again. We are here to help this state address this crisis, but we need your help to continue providing this lifeline to Mainers.

I urge you to support LD 2136 so that Maine's shelter system does not experience a collapse across the state in the coming months. Thank you for your time today and for your consideration of LD 2136.