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Mid-Maine  
Homeless Shelter  
& Services  
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Waterville, ME  
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## MID-MAINE HOMELESS SHELTER & SERVICES

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January 23, 2024

Dear Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members of the Committee,

RE: LD 2136 and LD2138

I write in support of LD 2136 and LD 2138. These bills present an opportunity to shore up a dangerously weakened system that is more needed today than at any other time in our state history.

I do not have to tell anyone on this committee that it's bad out there. Our service center cities are struggling under the weight of rising rents and unsheltered homelessness, and low barrier shelters are at risk of immediate closure due to insufficient revenue. Other businesses and nonprofits pass on these costs to their clients. We cannot do that; instead, we come to you.

Failure to support our shelter system - and in particular our low barrier shelters - has measurable consequences. One of these consequences is the impact on healthcare costs and the health outcomes of those who are unsheltered.

A study published last year in the **American Journal of Preventative Medicine** (Richards & Kuhn, AJPM focus 2 (1), 100043, 2023) reviewed the existing literature on the health outcomes for sheltered versus unsheltered populations and there is strong evidence that "unsheltered individuals **may experience additional disease burdens relating to exposures such as violence, exploitation, weather, pollution, and poor sanitation**" and "unsheltered populations experience **higher rates of chronic disease, serious mental illness, and substance abuse** than sheltered populations. Unsheltered homelessness is strongly associated with chronic homelessness that exacerbates serious mental illness and substance use, which is often co-occurring".

Permanent housing is always the first and best choice, and this body has rightly invested in developing affordable housing. But it will take several decades to achieve the level of housing stock necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable have access to simple decent and affordable permanent housing. Until then, there is value in high quality, low barrier shelter when there is no direct path straight to housing. To suggest otherwise ignores reality.

*"Providing Emergency Food & Shelter to Homeless and Displaced Persons in central Maine"*  
"Founded by the Interfaith Council in 1990"

We are willing to do our part. This winter Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services consistently served more than twice the number of people we've been funded to serve because we made a commitment to leave no one outside. As of yesterday, when our Waterville City Task Force met, we had reduced our numbers outside from well over 100 in October to just 1 individual. I implore you to make the same commitment. Don't leave anyone outside when there is something you can do to bring them inside.

Thank you for all of your efforts in support of emergency shelters over the last session. That funding has kept us going. And even though I enjoy these hearings, I also want to say that we can't keep meeting like this. As the saying goes, insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result each time. How do we get out of this toxic cycle?

When I came to this committee last month, Senator Pierce asked whether we have the necessary leadership to steward our sector through these challenging times. I have thought a lot about that question in the weeks since then and have reached the conclusion that we do not. It is not because we lack subject matter expertise or the will to move the needle. Rather, we lack a single organization with a single accountable leader focused full time on homelessness who can provide both visionary leadership and effective administration of taxpayer dollars.

While we lack strategic coordination and leadership, our system is full of smart, capable, and hardworking people. We absolutely have the necessary talent. But all the talent in the world can't overcome a disjointed and unaccountable system that lacks the structure and the resources to advocate for and implement targeted, data driven, evidence-based change. That's how we saw a 99% drop in unsheltered homelessness in Waterville this winter, and it's how we will end unsheltered homelessness across the state.


If we do not tackle these issues, you will see me and my colleagues back next year - same bat time, same bat channel. Let's agree that Maine can and must do better and let's figure out how to fix our homeless response system at the same time as we work to secure the necessary resources.

For now, please make sure that Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services and our colleagues across the state are still here next January to have that conversation.

Please vote to pass LD 2136 and LD 2138 (as amended). The alternative doesn't bear contemplating.

With deep respect and warm regards,

Yours in partnership,



Dr. Katie Spencer White  
CEO, Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services

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