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United Way
of Southern Maine



Good afternoon, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing,

My name is Ali Lovejoy, and I am the Vice President of Mission Advancement at Preble Street. I am here today to support LD 2136, a bill that would help address the ongoing funding deficit for 39 shelters in Maine. Since 2016, we have been at a stagnant funding for shelters in Maine. The bill requests the first permanent state increase in funding since 2016, during which emergency shelters have been asked to provide more services despite facing a 26.7% inflation rate.

The Emergency Shelter Homeless Assistance Program (ESHAP) is based on three revenue sources: State funding, Federal funding, and funding from the Maine Real Estate Transfer Tax. These funding sources have remained relatively consistent for the past seven years. However, during that time, we have been confronted with an unprecedented public health crisis and a corresponding increase in homelessness and poverty, particularly in rural areas. According to the Maine Housing's report on the 2019 Point in Time (PIT) Count, there were 1,215 individuals experiencing homelessness in Maine in 2019¹, with 95 of those individuals reporting being unsheltered. The same survey from the year 2023 said that 4,258 were experiencing homelessness in Maine². Of these, 299 individuals were unsheltered. This week, Maine is once again performing a PIT count and we have no reason to believe that we will see those numbers decrease.

It is clear from these numbers alone that the need for shelter in Maine is continuing to increase. In the City of Portland, the City Council passed an emergency ordinance to increase the number of shelter beds at the city's Homeless Service Center (HSC) from 208 to 258. Even with these additional beds, the Homeless Services Center, and Preble Street's three shelters (Elena's Way, Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter, and Florence House) are all at capacity. Alongside this, we have also seen a rising number of encampments throughout the state. In the past five months alone, the City of Portland has swept at least four significant encampments, forcing individuals to find other places to stay. Emergency shelters play a critical role in our communities. As shelter providers statewide work to meet the growing need, our staff are constantly challenged to meet the complex needs of the clients we serve.

For many individuals, shelters provide the primary entry point to the healthcare system and recovery community. Shelters also provide ongoing outreach to unsheltered individuals, case management for those in the shelter, and connections to other programs, such as healthcare services, recovery programs, and other social services. For this work to be done with the care and professionalism necessary to be successful, shelters must be able to hire and retain trained, professional, and knowledgeable staff members. This means providing a competitive wage, benefits, time, and the support necessary to maintain work with high intensity and emotional impact. Current funding deficits make this incredibly difficult to do.

There are thirty-nine shelters in the State of Maine, all at capacity. While temporary funding is of great assistance, as demonstrated by this Joint Select Housing Committee last session, it does not provide the consistent, relied-upon source of funding needed to allow shelters to plan, budget, and respond to the tremendous increase in need we see throughout Maine. Across the state, shelters are in a state of constant struggle to keep doors open and keep people safe.

Shelters play a critical role in solving homelessness and in keeping communities safe. I hope we can work together to designate an increase in permanent state funding for shelters so that all these beds on the front line of this housing crisis remain available for the most vulnerable of our society.

Thank you.