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January 23, 2024

Re: LD 2136, An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals; and LD 2138, An Act to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing, my name is Vickey Merrill, and I am the Advocacy Director for Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM is the largest supportive housing provider for homeless populations in Maine. I am a Tri-Chair for the Maine Continuum of Care, Co-Chair of the Maine Homeless Policy Committee, and serve on the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 2136, An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals, and LD 2138, Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters.

LD 2136 provides ongoing funds for homeless shelters – allocating \$10 million beginning next fiscal year. LD 2138 (as originally written) directs the Department of Health and Human Services to increase its overnight bed rate of reimbursement for low-barrier shelters to \$90 per night. It also directs the Department of Health and Human Services to pursue a waiver from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to access Medicaid funds to serve unhoused persons with substance use disorder or mental health disorders or who are elderly persons with medical needs or persons with disabilities with medical needs. As amended by the Sponsor, LD 2138 would create a state line item for low-barrier shelter funding at \$2.5M.

Emergency shelters depend upon a variety of funding streams, that even when combined do not cover the cost of providing shelter.

Shelters haven't had enough resources to maintain sufficient capacity and staffing to meet the need for years – and the pandemic exponentially worsened this crisis. And our shelters are in crisis. For Maine to safely meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness, we must have a robust, adequately funded shelter system – it is the foundation of our homeless service system.

Shelters in Maine have been full, operating overflow shelters, and/or forced to turn people away due to insurmountable capacity issues for years. Low-barrier shelters in Maine have a combined almost \$4 M deficit. Without additional funding allocations emergency shelters in Maine will close – some imminently.

We need all of Maine's 39 shelters to remain open, or we will most certainly see an exponential growth in encampments.

Having a shelter system with sufficient capacity allows the focus to shift to having everyone inside and housing people and keeping them housed. Low-barrier shelters are successful in assisting people access housing, especially permanent supportive housing (PSH) for people with the most complex issues underlying their homelessness. It is extremely challenging to house this population when they are outside solely trying to survive. Emergency shelters provide a foundation from which people with the most acute mental health needs, substance use disorder, and other vulnerabilities can launch and become stably housed.

These bills will allow all of Maine's shelters to remain open in the short term and offer long-term solutions to help low-barrier shelters have the financial capacity to serve Maine's most vulnerable populations experiencing homelessness. These bills will provide financial incentives for other



shelters in Maine to lower their barriers, and bring people indoors so people can be better served in their communities. This is how Maine will end homelessness.

Maine is experiencing an unsheltered homelessness/encampment crisis:

- As recently as December, Hubs were reporting more than 900 people sleeping outside throughout Maine – and that is after months of effort to bring people indoors.
- In the 2023 Point in Time (PIT) there were 290 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness throughout all of Maine – the highest unsheltered PIT count Maine has ever had. Currently there are 300 people unsheltered in Sanford alone.
 - The 2022 PIT counted 164 unsheltered individuals – the 2023 PIT saw an 83% increase in unsheltered homelessness in Maine compared to 2022.
 - The previous high was in 2017 with 180 people unsheltered.
 - Prior to 2016 Maine had less than 100 people unsheltered on the night of the PIT.

The bar should be high enough where everyone has access to housing, and if that is not immediately available access to shelter with professional services to help people be housed.

Encampments are not good for any city or town. Access to shelter and housing is.

This Committee and Legislature has made important investments in housing and ending homelessness – thank you. But the current situation is dire, and an additional injection of resources is vital.

Please support LD 2136 and LD 2138 (as amended), so we can ensure emergency shelters across Maine can continue to operate so we can all work together to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.