

State of Maine 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Housing
Testimony of Betty St. Hilaire, Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center, and Green Street
United Community Living Center.
January 23, 2024
Supporting: LD 2136 "An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals"
and LD 2138, "Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters"

Dear Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, Senator Pouliot and Honorable Committee Members.

My name is Betty St. Hilaire. I am the chairperson of the advisory team for the Augusta Emergency Overnight Warming Center and the Chairperson of the Board of Directors for the Green Street United Community Living Center, a proposed low barrier, pet friendly shelter and supported living facility in Augusta. This facility will not only provide low barrier access to warmth and safety for our most at-risk community members, but by working with Community Health Workers, will provide a high touch model of connection to resources and opportunities needed improve the lives of the population served in ways that are meaningful to them. These include education, employment, healthcare services, including mental health, medication assisted treatment and recovery, and peer support services. I would like to express my strong support for LD2136 and 2138. I believe that these two bills are a step in the right direction of providing a pathway to addressing the needs of the unhoused population in the state of Maine and reducing the number of homeless individuals by providing the resources and services needed for them to move forward and out of homelessness.

As you are all aware, homeless service providers are not and have not been adequately funded for a long time and are running at deficits that are not sustainable. Some are in danger of shutting down due to lack of financial support and that would be a shame. We already don't have enough and to lose even one at this time of crisis would be shameful. According to Maine Housing data, there were 4411 unhoused individuals in the state of Maine in 2022. Maine housing lists 47 emergency shelters on its website. That equals 93 people per site, but only 19 of those 47 sites are general shelters that can be accessed by anyone while the others are a mix of youth, veterans, family, gender specific, pregnant women, domestic violence, or substance abuse shelters. If you don't fit into one of those categories, you are unable to access the services at those facilities. There are only 5 existing low barrier shelters in the entire state of Maine. A state with over 35,000 square miles or territory. The homeless crisis in Maine is growing while the support that this population needs is potentially shrinking. If something isn't done to reverse this direction, it will only get worse. We need more facilities, more beds, and more services, and we need funding for them as well as for the existing shelters and the services that they provide.

LD2136 provides ongoing funding for homeless shelters in the amount of \$10,000,000 a year. This funding is desperately needed to support the unhoused population. Homeless shelters are often a last resort for people experiencing homelessness and serve as a crucial resource when people are at their lowest point. Adequately funding homeless shelters, including low barrier shelters, will enable them to continue to provide support and services to this vulnerable population.

LD 2138 will increase the overnight reimbursement per bed for low barrier homeless shelters to \$90 per night. All shelters serve vulnerable populations, low barrier shelters serve our most vulnerable populations, those that otherwise would have no options due to being unable to access other available shelters and services due to a multitude of issues including but not limited to substance

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use, mental health, criminal record, and other factors that would keep them out of the regular shelters. In low barrier environments, there is no requirement for identification, background or credit checks or sobriety. These low barrier shelters serve the population with the highest needs in the unhoused community and are a vital lifeline to services that may be unattainable without them. They are also the highest cost to operate due to the nature of the populations served. Lack of funding for this much needed resource puts communities at risk of unintended consequences such as increased substance use disorders, criminal activity and growing encampments in our cities and towns. In addition, it deprives these individuals of the needed supports and services that could help them move their lives forward and out of homelessness.

In conclusion, I strongly urge you to pass LD 2136 and LD 2138 as amended with a separate funding line for low barrier shelters. In closing, I ask you to consider this question, What is the cost to our state and our society of doing nothing?