



## Testimony in Support of LD 2138

January 23, 2024

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Members of the Housing Committee,

My name is Tess Parks, and I am a Policy Organizer with Maine Recovery Advocacy Project (ME-RAP), a bipartisan grassroots network dedicated to addressing substance use issues in Maine through community-driven and policy-based solutions. I am here today to testify on behalf of ME-RAP in strong support of LD 2138.

It is evident that Maine is experiencing both a housing and opioid crisis. Maine's unhoused population leaped from 1,297 in January 2020 to 4,258 in January 2023<sup>1</sup> and overdose deaths have continued to rise year after year. As low barrier shelters are struggling to keep their doors open, the need for shelter services has never been greater. We fear that the closing of any low barrier shelter in Maine will put many of our unhoused community members with substance use disorder (SUD) and other mental health challenges in grave danger.

Low barrier shelters are unique in that they will not turn someone away for being unable to stop using substances. As noted by the American Psychiatric Association<sup>2</sup>, a defining symptom of substance use disorder is the inability to stop using substances despite harmful consequences, such as losing shelter. Many people with SUD are unable to commit to the sobriety requirement imposed by many high barrier shelters. If low barrier shelters close, many folks with SUD may end up in an encampment or without any shelter. Additionally, high barrier shelters will likely not have the capacity to take in everyone that is displaced from a low barrier shelter closing.

Unhoused community members with SUD heavily rely on low barrier homeless shelters for basic healthcare delivery, connections to housing and employment resources, case management, and many other social services. Not to mention, shelter staff are saving lives. Staff at one program of Preble Street<sup>3</sup> responded to an overdose every ten days in 2023, reversing as many as possible. Furthermore, it is important to note that unhoused community members accounted for 21% of the fatal overdoses in Portland in 2023. If low barrier shelters close and substance users lose their critical lifeline to care and basic needs, we will see a continued rise in fatal overdoses.

In the midst of both this housing and opioid crisis, we urge this Committee to support LD 2138 to protect our most vulnerable community members from the risk of losing shelter and preventable death. I thank you for your time and would be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://themainemonitor.org/homeless-ponder-next-destination-as-portland-housing-crisis-intensifies/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction-substance-use-disorders/what-is-a-substance-use-disorder>

<sup>3</sup> Testimony of Terence Miller, Advocacy Director at Preble Street on LD 1975  
<https://legislature.maine.gov/bills/getTestimonyDoc.asp?id=180094>