



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing, An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals, LD 2136, January 23, 2024

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

My name is Tom Doherty, and I am the Executive Director of Milestone Recovery. I am testifying in support of LD 2136. The preservation of the emergency shelter system in Maine is essential given the shortage of housing we are experiencing. The most recent encampment crisis in Portland is occurring in many other communities in Maine. We saw this critical shortage of beds firsthand as our outreach teams encountered people willing to leave the encampments and had no place to go.

This lack of beds created health issues with Hepatitis A, it facilitated predation on an already traumatized population further setting them back and created an outpouring of frustration in the folks living and working nearby. The lack of beds anywhere handcuffed our law enforcement community and district attorney who needed to respond to offenses that didn't rise to the level of jail but were disrupting the surrounding community. Fining someone living in a tent is a cruel joke. Sending them to jail because they used the bathroom outside is a waste of critical resources and criminalizing homelessness makes anyone's climb out of poverty just that much harder. Law enforcement should be able to offer an option of entering a shelter as a diversion. Milestone emergency shelter has been a place where police can drop off someone knowing they will be safe and get that officer back on the road without a mountain of paperwork needed to jail someone. The look of relief on an officer's face when they drop someone at our place is priceless. They appreciate being able to quickly solve an issue and get back to the next issue at hand.

Our shelter's largest line item is staff and to keep and replace staff we have had to increase pay beyond what we could ever imagine. Our staff do very difficult work with folks who have multiple needs and challenges. They are often agitated, needing personal hygiene help, wound care and above all else a listening ear. If they are admitted to Milestone they are intoxicated and need to be closely watched for overdose and seizures. I am in awe of the work that gets done here every evening. I hope that you can support that work so we can continue to fill this essential role in caring for our neighbors.