



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Testimony of Rep. Colleen Madigan introducing

LD 2138, Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters

Before the Joint Select Committee on Housing

Good afternoon Senator Pierce, Representative Gere and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. I am Colleen Madigan and I represent House District 64. I am here to present LD 2138, Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters, intended to provide desperately needed support for low barrier shelters across the state, which face a collective debt of \$3.9m in this last fiscal year alone due to inadequate state revenue streams.

As your committee recently heard, there are 39 emergency shelters in the State of Maine, five of which are low-barrier and run by private organizations: PCHC Hope House; Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter; Milestone Shelter; and Preble Street's Elena's Way and Florence House. Today I offer a suggested amendment to provide \$2.5 million in dedicated, ongoing funding to partially address the persistent, growing deficit for these low-barrier shelters.

Low-barrier shelters are defined by MaineHousing as those shelters that accept guests regardless of substance use disorder, mental illness, criminal legal involvement, or ongoing acute medical and other related needs.¹ They don't require identification, and don't conduct background or credit checks, and they don't require people to be sober. In fact, almost all of the individuals that utilize these shelters come in with active substance use issues, mental illness, or both. For example, Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter in Waterville reports that 90-100% of their shelter guests experience addiction. At Preble Street, approximately every eight days, staff respond to an overdose. The regularity of drug use and potential for overdose is so high that some of these shelters have installed alert systems in their bathrooms so staff can better identify and respond to an overdose.

These facts illustrate that Maine's low barrier shelters provide so much more than "shelter" from rain and cold. They are vital components of our housing and public health systems, providing the least costly and most effective refuge and entryway to support for individuals who struggle with mental illness, substance abuse, and physical limitations that prevent them from accessing higher-barrier shelters and who would otherwise end up on the streets, in tents, at emergency departments, or in our local jails and prisons.

¹ See 99-346 MAINE STATE HOUSING AUTHORITY Chapter 19: HOMELESS SOLUTIONS RULE.

Just like emergency departments as compared to other levels of the healthcare system, low-barrier shelters, by definition, provide a range and level of service to a high need population that translates into greater costs and the need for additional financial support.

Staffing levels, both in terms of numbers and skill, provision of 24-7 services, additional technology, and provision of case management and other services to build relationships, identify individual needs, and making appropriate links to on site or community housing and recovery partners are vital, and they require sufficient and reliable funding if they are to remain open and available.

As you heard during their recent Committee briefing, there is currently a \$3.9 million deficit for the five low-barrier shelters. And you will hear again today that at least one of these low barrier shelters, Bangor's Hope House Shelter, will close by October 2024, taking with it 56 beds and pushing those individuals into higher cost, less effective, less humane environments unless significant funding is secured.

The other shelter operators will tell you they are not far behind, and that they too cannot continue to keep their doors open unless significant additional funding is obtained.

Particularly at a time when our substance use, mental health and housing crises are still raging, and during this phase while we are waiting for some of our substantial investments in those areas to develop and come online, it is essential that we continue to resource these low barrier shelters. We hope you will consider this request for a designated funding line for low-barrier shelters to partially close the deficit and protect these beds across the state. The people that need these services are the ones bearing the brunt of these simultaneous crises. I know that the members of this Committee know that we need more housing at all income levels. The lack of housing has impacted those with multiple needs and little income most of all because as we all know, stuff flows downhill.

I want to leave you with the story of my friend, Will. I am lucky enough to live in Waterville. We have a great low barrier shelter there- the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter. Will lives there. Will is in early recovery from substance use disorder, but he wasn't when he entered the shelter. He found services there that allowed him to consider recovery. He started volunteering at our local soup kitchen and found a community. A community that recognized him as valuable. I met Will at the soup kitchen. He plays guitar there for people. He also plays at local open mic nights. You probably don't know this, but I am a bad guitar player. I started playing about a year and half ago. I can play some AC/DC riffs. Will is so much better than me. He's sort of become my unofficial guitar teacher. I have learned how to better care for my electric and acoustic guitar thanks to Will. We talk about music, guitar strings, and how to better help people with substance use disorder. Will recognizes that getting help from the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter likely saved his life. But, that is not the whole story. Will is a valuable member of my community. He shares his talents. He supports and helps others. He accepts people for who they are. People at the Lighthouse Soup Kitchen in Waterville look up to him. Will and many others like him are important. They have so much more to offer us all. Funding low barrier shelters so that their doors remain open is vital right now. We had record overdose deaths last year, a mental health

system that needs more investment, and a lack of affordable housing. These shelters are working on the front lines to save lives and change them.