

Testimony from Tobin Williamson of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition regarding:

LD 2136: An Act to Provide Financial Support for Shelters for Unhoused Individuals

Sponsored By: Representative Anne-Marie Mastraccio of Sanford

AND

LD 2138: Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters

Sponsored By: Representative Colleen Madigan of Waterville

Public Hearing: January 23, 2024 at 1:00pm

Dear Members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing:

My name is Tobin Williamson and I am the Manager of Advocacy & Policy with the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), a network of around 100 member organizations working to enhance the lives of Maine's immigrant communities across the state. MIRC works to advance systemic changes in Maine through collaborative advocacy to ensure that voices and perspectives of the state's large, diverse, and growing immigrant communities are heard at the State House in Augusta, in the Halls of Congress in D.C., and in municipalities throughout Maine.

Aside from affluent households, pretty much all sub-sections of Maine populations are struggling with housing availability now. I was at a Maine Council on Aging meeting this week where it was mentioned there are only 49 housing units in Maine for every 100 low-income older Maine residents, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. As reported by *Maine Public's* Robbie Feinberg, there has been a big increase in student homelessness. My organization opened a shelter with services specifically for asylum seeker families last year. The City of Portland opened two large, brand-new shelters in 2023 to provide shelter for both "mainstream" and asylum seeking individuals who did not have housing, and have already had to pass an emergency measure to allow for additional capacity.

Indeed, we have a housing crisis throughout the state. At MIRC, we know the state is interconnected, and we advocate for more housing solutions for *all* Maine residents, whether they are newly-arrived asylum seekers or seventh-generation Mainers, whether they are just down on their luck or are chronically homeless; the more beds and housing units available, the better the odds any of those communities gets shelter. Low-barrier shelters are the first step toward the site-based Housing First model championed by the Governor and this legislature last year. And according to Preble Street, "low-barrier shelters cost more than other shelters to operate due to significant staffing requirements and the intensity of the work, including overdose prevention and thoughtful, intensive aftercare that is required."

As reported in the *Portland Press Herald* last month by journalist Rachel Ohm, the need for funding these shelters is more urgent than ever. "At a time when homelessness is exploding across Maine and when tragic encampments have popped up throughout the state," Mark Swann, Preble Street's Executive Director, said to this committee last month, "Maine's critically important low-barrier shelters are in danger of closing due to lack of funds." At least one of the shelters, in Bangor, is very close to closing without an infusion of funds, and others in Portland, Bangor, and Waterville are really struggling.

LD 2136, Representative Mastraccio's bill, would provide essential funds for shelters by appropriating funds for the Maine State Housing Authority. LD 2138, Representative Madigan's bill, would provide more funding for low-barrier overnight shelters by raising the overnight bed rate of reimbursement from the Department of Health and Human Services, and have DHHS pursue a waiver from the U.S. DHHS to get federal Medicaid funding for certain populations.

We join our friends at groups like Preble Street and Milestone in strongly encouraging you to pass LD 2136 and LD 2138. The need for low-barrier housing shelters in Maine is greater than ever, and this legislation would help address that need. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.