



**February 23, 2024**

**Testimony in Support of the Emergency Housing & Affordable Housing Production Sections in the Proposed Supplemental Budget**

**Presented by Paige Johnston  
on behalf of Healthy Acadia & Community Partners**

Good Afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing: my name is Paige Johnston, and I am here on behalf of Healthy Acadia and community members and partners to testify in support of the sections in the Governor's proposed supplemental budget related to Emergency Housing & Affordable Housing Production.

Healthy Acadia is a community health organization working to build healthier communities and address the health challenges we face across the Downeast region of Hancock and Washington counties. We work collaboratively and creatively with hundreds of partners and thousands of community members to develop programming and services, coordinate education and outreach, and improve policies, systems, and environments to create lasting positive changes to the health of our communities.

Over the past several years, the challenges of housing insecurity and homelessness have grown alarmingly in our region, and it became clear that we could not address the health needs of our region without tackling these challenges. We now convene a robust Downeast Housing Collaborative, consisting of many community leaders across Washington and Hancock counties who are working tirelessly together to address the emergency housing crisis in our region and to create long-term solutions across the continuum of housing needs.

Based on the needs identified by this collaboration and by the community members we serve, and thanks to funding from the Emergency Housing Relief Fund, Healthy Acadia is in the second year of operating an Overnight Warming Shelter in Ellsworth serving the two-county region. Our Shelter opened in November, and will remain open, 7 nights a week, through April. It provides direly needed emergency safety and shelter for individuals who are unhoused and unable to access other supports. So far this winter, we have provided **87 people** with overnight shelter, and we have had **1,570 bed stays** - about 20 people each night. Our clients include people of all ages, ranging from youth in their teens to folks in their 80's; we serve individuals and families who

have been chronically unhoused for many years, as well as those who have only recently lost their housing. The high prices of housing, lack of available housing, full homeless shelters with waiting lists, and limited services for those who need help to be successful in housing are so extreme in our region, and this Warming Shelter provides the only opportunity for many local community members to avoid the dangers of sleeping outside in our rugged winters. The Warming Shelter has been an amazing community collaboration, with partners engaged in guiding the direction of the Warming Shelter through our Collaborative, and many providing key support, such as co-locating crisis and other services, and providing food, material, and other donations from hospitals, organizations, churches, individuals, and more. And none of this would have been possible without funding from the Emergency Housing Relief Fund, as authorized by the Legislature and Governor for the past two years.

In addition to meeting the immediate needs of individuals seeking safety and shelter throughout the cold months, we have also seen incredible long-term successes arise out of the Warming Shelter. As one of many examples, a young person who had been chronically unhoused for several years began using our Warming Shelter last winter, during our first year. At first, he would only come in at night and keep to himself. Then he slowly began utilizing daytime services at our INSPIRE Recovery & Community Center, which is co-located in the same space as our Overnight Warming Shelter. Working with the daytime programming, including recovery coaching, navigation, and more, he eventually found a job and permanent housing, and purchased an e-bike for transportation. As soon as our Warming Shelter opened this past November, he jumped at the opportunity to work a few nights a week as staff at the Shelter, above and beyond his full time job in the community, as he wanted to “give back.” He, and others like him, are now thriving, thanks to the Warming Shelter and the doors it opened not only to warm, safe beds, but also to trusted resources and opportunities for long-term growth and success.

Healthy Acadia and our partners are also engaged in increasing access to long-term affordable housing opportunities. We know that it is absolutely critical to address the housing crisis across the continuum, from emergency supports, to supportive long-term housing, to affordable home ownership, and more. Healthy Acadia and partners are engaged in multiple projects currently, including developing units for voucher-based housing, creating supportive paths to homeownership, providing navigation and support services to help people be successful in their housing, and more. We know how critical it is to build new units of housing that are affordable to own, which will reduce the pressure at all other points along the continuum - such as availability of units, pricing, and more.

We could not be more supportive of the two housing proposals you are considering today: **the \$16 million for the Emergency Housing Relief Fund** (which will continue to support Warming Shelters and other emergency supports) and the **\$10 million to bolster the Affordable Homeownership Program**. These are profoundly needed, extraordinarily effective, transformative investments in our communities and for our community members, providing immediate supports for those who are most vulnerable and suffering, as well as providing long-term opportunities for individuals and families to meet their potential and thrive.

On behalf of the undersigned partners and community members, I urge you to support these important investments in safety, shelter, housing, and health. Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Testimony Signatories:*

Allie Bodge, *Director of Operations, MDI & Ellsworth Housing Authorities*  
Carol Carew, RN, BSN, MBA, *Chief Executive Officer, Bucksport Regional Health Center*  
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Elsie Flemings, *Executive Director, Healthy Acadia*  
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Rebecca Palmer, *Executive Director, Down East Community Partners*  
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