



# Cumberland County District Attorney's Office

142 Federal Street, Portland, ME 04101  
Phone: 207-871-8384 Fax: 207-775-3561



**Jacqueline A. Sartoris**  
District Attorney

**Angela Cannon**  
Deputy District Attorney

February 24, 2025

**In reference to LD 210.** An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services, thank you for your time today. My name is Jacqueline Sartoris, and I am the District Attorney for Cumberland County. I am here to testify against LD 210. Specifically I am very concerned about the impacts of limiting rent assistance to 3 months and the certain trickle down into the criminal legal system as well as the certain erosion at Portland's sense of community safety and well-being.

I understand that this proposal is informed in part from what appears to be the disproportionate use of general assistance funding in Portland. But what is also disproportionate is the sheer number of people needing services who are living in and around Portland. Portland is the de facto service center not just for Cumberland County municipalities, or even for Cumberland and a great deal of York County, but for the entire state. Maine is still a big small state, very rural for the most part, and we don't have the population densities to support hospitals, service centers, nonprofits, etc, at a cost-effective scale, except, for the most part, in Portland. You can see that the hub of mental health treatment, substance use treatment, and basic help that is available in Portland as opposed to virtually any other Maine municipality. You can see that in the homeless shelter numbers outside of Portland, both what is available, and for how many beds. Not many. Rather than adopt policies that claim to be concerned about "equalizing" general assistance between very different communities, I hope the Committee will instead focus on the data that shows that Portland is serving a unique and essential role for our entire state, and then consider the consequences of adopting this proposal as if impacts to Portland are of statewide significance, because they are.

Portland provides a lot of services because that is where the need is. And Portland has done some very difficult things over the past two years to try to stop the revolving door of those most in need through the jail, courts, and emergency services, and into stable supportive housing. Portland closed the encampments. They opened up the new Homeless Services Center. My office, the Portland police, and the Sheriff's Office have worked together to use instances of criminal conduct to leverage people towards help. We are meeting people where they are but also insisting that they try to address what drives their behavior so that we do not keep seeing the same people month after month, accumulating incredible numbers of cases that clog our still-backlogged caseload. And it works. Prior to the HSC being available, my information is that only a single person went from an encampment into semi-permanent

housing. Since the HSC opened fully, I understand that well over 60 people had transferred from the HSC into semi-permanent housing. This saves money and restores a sense of order to the community.

I have a particular set of knowledge and concerns about such cases, because I opted to spend a quarter of my time as District Attorney covering the Mental Health docket for the past year and a half. This is not the docket where you go on TV for getting a kickass conviction. It is where the fraying seams and holes of our current resources and approaches to dealing with mentally unwell defendants are exposed. For me, it is where public policy is most needed at this time, as we are returning people again and again to the public when they are unmedicated and untreated, and therefore remain very likely to recommit criminal conduct.

The one through line for the approximately 90 defendants I currently work with on this docket remains housing. Where stable housing becomes available, mentally challenged people are able to meet with their ACT team to greater effect, to stay on medication, to develop community, to stay in recovery. Where housing is not available, they generally disappear, only to reappear with a new criminal case. In a recent data pull of our active criminal cases, we had 111 defendants with over 800 cases. Many of these defendants are on the Mental Health docket.

Capping housing funding to 3 months will not make those who struggle with mental health challenges more likely to get a job or get off public assistance. It will instead return them to the street and to my caseload.

I realize that the costs to the State budget are high. What I also realize is that there will be no net savings if this change is adopted. The cost instead will be to the emergency rooms, the jail, and to Riverview and Dorothea Dix, because when these folks return to my docket, I will have to ask to have their competency assessed by State Forensics, which is already experiencing a weeks-long backlog in existing cases, and some real challenges to the safety of their staff. We will be robbing Peter to pay Paul. And I won't be able to charge either of them with a crime – it's perfectly legal to shift costs from one governmental entity to the next, and ultimately to the host community.

A last word about Portland: they are dealing with mentally challenged people from all over Maine, and maybe we could notice that. When a defendant enters a plea in court, the Judge must inquire "where were you born?" I have been listening to these responses for years now. The reply is almost always a town in Maine, often well outside of Cumberland County.

When people are in need, we go to find other people. We attempt to build community by seeking out those who are like us, those who accept us, those who can help. Like it or not, those roles are served in Portland for most of Maine's neediest. Rather than punish Portland for handling our shared problems, perhaps we could accept that their important work benefits us all and support it accordingly.

Thank you for your time.

Jacqueline Sartoris

District Attorney, Cumberland County