



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Testimony of Helen L. Breña before
the joint Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees
in opposition to

Proposed Cuts to General Assistance in the Biennial Budget

February 13, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees.

My name is Helen L. Breña, President and CEO of the YMCA of Southern Maine. I'm here to express my deep concern about the proposed reduction in General Assistance (GA) housing support to three months. This proposal was originally included in the supplemental budget proposal, and while it was removed from that budget, there was discussion of including the proposal in the biennial budget. I urge you not to do that.

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of our Portland men's dormitory program – a century of providing housing stability for those who need it most. Our 88-room facility serves as a crucial steppingstone for men working to transition into permanent housing they can sustain independently. Each year, this program serves over 135 individuals who would otherwise be homeless. These aren't just numbers – they're people rebuilding their lives with determination and dignity. We estimate we've touched nearly 15,000 lives through our dormitory over the years.

The impact of this proposed change would be immediate and severe. Currently, 32 men in our dorm – 25 current residents and seven approaching the threshold – would be affected by this three-month limit. These community members face returning to homelessness – erasing their hard-won progress toward independence.

The cost to our community when individuals lose housing stability is substantial – tens of thousands of dollars per person annually. Emergency services usage increases, health outcomes deteriorate, and the strain on our public systems grows. Studies consistently show that maintaining stable housing through programs like ours is far more cost-effective than managing the cascading effects of homelessness.

When people lose stable housing, they lose access to healthcare providers, case managers, and support services. This creates a devastating domino effect that impacts our entire community - from emergency services to healthcare systems.

It doesn't need to be this way. Many of our residents are single men who have limited access to other assistance programs, making GA their primary pathway to stability. These are members of our community working diligently to overcome significant obstacles. With the current housing crisis, where rents far outpace wages, three months is simply insufficient time to secure affordable housing and build the financial foundation needed to maintain it.

Two recent experiences demonstrate the vital role of longer-term GA support. The stability Jessie found at the YMCA's dorm over several months helped him achieve sobriety, secure employment, and prepare to move into his own apartment. Another resident used GA support while stabilizing his life and finding work, ultimately saving enough for independent housing. These successes required more than three months of support to achieve.

We strongly urge these committees to reconsider this severe reduction in GA support. This isn't just a policy change – it's a decision that will force Maine people into homelessness. This critical investment provides the foundation people need to rebuild their lives and contribute to Maine's future.

Thank you.

Contact: Helen L. Breña, YMCA of Southern Maine
P: [207-874-1111 **E:** hbrena@ymcaofsouthernmaine.org