

## **Testimony in Support of LD 641, "An Act to Support Diversion Efforts to Address Homelessness in Maine"**

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and the esteemed members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development. My name is Jennifer Weatherbee and I am the **Hub Coordinator** overseeing **Hub 7** which covers **Penobscot/Piscataquis Counties** within Maine's Homeless Response System. Today, I stand before you to express our strong support for LD 641, "An Act to Support Diversion Efforts to Address Homelessness in Maine," sponsored by Representative Marc Malon, which seeks to allocate critical funding to the Housing Problem Solving Program.

As echoed in previous testimonies, our current homelessness prevention programs, like the Housing Problem Solving (HPS) Program, have demonstrated commendable success in cost-effectiveness and early intervention. In 2024 alone, HPS completed 663 interventions, with 66% of those served (437 individuals) receiving assistance before becoming homeless. Financial assistance was required in 73% of cases (483 individuals), and 78% (519 individuals) had their housing issue successfully resolved. The total budget for HPS was \$750,000, meaning it operated at a cost of just \$1,131.22 per client served and \$1,445.09 per successful resolution. In comparison, the Temporary Rapid Rehousing Program (TRRP) cost over \$7,000 per client and over \$10,000 per resolution in 2023, while emergency shelters cost approximately \$36,000 per bed annually.

In **Hub 7** over the past 3 months, we have recorded an inflow of **146** individuals and families entering our homelessness response system, compared to an outflow of only **77**. Of those who exited, **40** were successfully diverted or transitioned into stable housing. Unfortunately, some individuals included in the outflow total were incarcerated or lost contact with our system, leaving us with no way to track their status.

This imbalance underscores the growing demand for services and the strain on our already overloaded system. With proper funding, we could divert more individuals from homelessness and better serve those currently in our system. These trends reflect a broader statewide challenge, highlighting the urgent need for increased resources and support. In short- our system is stuck. We do not have enough resources to effectively support the volume of individuals in our communities who are experiencing Homelessness and Housing instability. Programs like Housing Problem Solving prevent people from entering the homeless response system in the first place. This is essential.

With the proposed funding from LD 641, our hub could significantly amplify our intervention strategies. Specifically, additional funds would allow us to:

- Hire more Diversion coordinators. These coordinators provide invaluable work and have housing problem solving conversations with people in the need. In these conversations- they typically explore other solutions before providing funds. Maria, one of our diversion coordinators in Bangor works hard to stretch these funds out as far as possible- as they often run out. She explores all other resources, and solutions first. Many times, a successful diversion is having a conversation with an estranged family member, mediating a conversation which then enables them to return to their home, other times its supporting with a bus ticket to return to their loved ones, or a new job, or negotiating with a landlord a return to their previous home. Diversion isn't just about financial assistance, sometimes it's just having a person who is knowledgeable in resources and skilled in mediation- at the other end of that phone line who is needed to break down barriers and help to determine someone's next steps. These coordinators are at the front lines of preventing homelessness, and we need more of them.
- Provide more financial assistance. Because funded is limited, Diversion coordinators are not always able to provide the funds needed to prevent homelessness. At times individuals experiencing poverty may put off an owed utility bill or rent a few months- and by the time they seek help, the amount is too high to support. Additional funds can help providers to support more people and prevent more from entering this already clogged system.
- Prevent evictions. The personal toll that an eviction can have on an individual or family's life can be catastrophic. Evictions can lead to loss of jobs, loss of healthcare and subsequent health issues. Children who are pulled out of school systems – away from their friends and teachers, their education disrupted. The trauma of eviction can have a lifelong effect. Not to mention, how challenging it is to find a new apartment with an eviction on your record. In my previous role as an outreach worker, I worked with people experiencing homelessness and supported them with finding new housing. If someone had an eviction on their record, finding a new apartment was next to impossible. Eviction can lead to a lifetime of homelessness, and debt that they may never be able to dig their self out of. Supporting Diversion programs seem like an obvious solution that can prevent a lifelong homelessness.

The data from our hubs across the state clearly illustrate the need for a robust funding increase as proposed by LD 641. This bill is not merely a funding mechanism; it's a lifeline

that will empower us to 'stop the bleeding' in our communities and create a more sustainable framework for preventing homelessness.

I urge you to support LD 641, to strengthen our capacity to combat homelessness effectively and compassionately across Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I am happy to answer any questions you might have.