

State of Maine - 132nd Legislature  
Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development  
Testimony of Karen Gonya on behalf of Homeless Services of Aroostook  
(Presque Isle, Maine)  
March 18, 2025

Supporting:  
LD698, "An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine"

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development:

My name is Karen Gonya, and I am a board member of Homeless Services of Aroostook. I am here today to speak on behalf our organization, which operates the only homeless shelter north of Bangor.

We opened in 1984 as a high barrier shelter. Since then, we added a critical low barrier program in 2019, an overnight winter warming shelter in 2022, and an unsheltered outreach program just last year.

My point is that we have grown our services to meet an ever-increasing need. The same cannot be said for state funding for homeless shelters. ESHAP funds from Maine State Housing have remained unchanged for years – with no increases to cover the cost of inflation or the cost of operating more beds in the state.

Our operating budget was about \$770,000 last year, which covered not only housing and food, but the cost of staff to keep our residents safe, navigation services to help residents overcome barriers, and facility maintenance. With this budget, we housed 216 adults and 28 children in our high and low barrier programs. We helped 90 people in our warming shelter last winter. Fourteen were served via our outreach program, and we helped 79 of our residents access permanent housing.

Less than \$219,000 of our budget came from ESHAP funding for operations, and we will receive \$15,000 less this year simply because more beds were added to shelters elsewhere in the state. We work hard to offset funding shortages.

We ask municipalities from across our region annually for funding to support the shelter. Unfortunately, less than half do so, but we are working to increase this support.

We pursue grant opportunities. While we have been successful in achieving some of these, they are typically restricted for a specific purpose.

We benefit from the support of local businesses, churches, and citizens and are grateful for their generosity; however, that funding is not reliable throughout the year for daily expenses. And many donations are in-kind, which while appreciated and useful, does not help pay the bills.

We are struggling right now to meet payroll. We are limiting expenses, from basics like turning down heat to the more drastic step of cutting staff hours. But without more reliable funding, we are worried about the future of our shelter. It would be such a tremendous disservice to our region – which is bigger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined – to NOT have a homeless shelter.

We are not alone. There is a desperate need at shelters across the state. I urge you to support LD698, which would increase funding to shelters from about \$7 a bed night to \$19 a night. While this is still just a portion of the actual cost, it will make a tremendous difference in helping to keep our doors open.

Thank you.

Karen Gonya  
Homeless Services of Aroostook Board Member  
Resident of Presque Isle