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Bucksport, ME

**Testimony in Support of LD 698: An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine.**

Good afternoon Representative Gere, Senator Curry, and esteemed Committee Members,

Thank you for the chance to speak today in support of LD 698: An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine. My name is Julie Ream. I am a proud resident of Bucksport and the Program Coordinator at H.O.M.E., Inc., a nonprofit organization that operates four homeless shelters in Hancock County. But today, I speak not just as a coordinator, but as someone with lived experience of homelessness, and I'd like to share how deeply H.O.M.E. impacted my family's journey.

In 2014, my youngest daughter and I found ourselves at a breaking point. My husband's battle with alcoholism had taken a devastating toll on our family. Our electricity had been shut off, and we had no way to get it turned back on. With nowhere left to turn, I made the painful decision to leave. For weeks, we bounced from one couch to another until I finally swallowed my pride and called the number for a shelter that 211 gave us.

After a tearful phone call, my daughter and I made our way to Orland, where we walked through the doors of H.O.M.E. and into a place that would change everything for us. The shelter didn't just offer my daughter and I, and eventually my youngest son a bed—it offered us something far more precious: community. People who shared what little food they had, who gave us hope when we had none, and who reminded me that we were not alone in our struggle.

I remember how the staff made sure my daughter had a backpack filled with school supplies, and when I saw that it was a Hello Kitty backpack—the one “girly” thing that she loved—I couldn't help but cry. It was a small gesture, but to me, it meant that we were exactly where we needed to be.

Thanks to the staff at H.O.M.E., I was able to secure the necessary documentation to apply for a housing voucher and they offered assistance with filling out paperwork to apply for housing. I even had the opportunity to give back by volunteering as an outreach driver, and eventually, I was hired as the receptionist. Sister Lucy, the founder of H.O.M.E., gave me the opportunity to become part of the team that had once supported me. After six months in shelter, we were able to secure a home in Bucksport, and my husband completed rehab. Our family was reunited, stronger and more determined than ever.

Today, more than a decade later, I am a part of the management team and my husband works at H.O.M.E. as well. He says he works there because it took care of our family when he couldn't, and that is why I urge you today to support this legislation. Without H.O.M.E., I don't know how long my children and I would have been forced to live in a constant state of uncertainty, couch surfing from one family member's house to another, unsure of where we would sleep each night. And while we were fortunate not to face the harsh reality of sleeping outside or in a car like so many others, we were still homeless.

The journey to stable housing isn't simple or easy, and for so many, the system can feel impossible to navigate. But having a place like H.O.M.E. and staff that genuinely cares can make all the difference. They gave me hope when I had none, and they gave my children stability when everything else was falling apart.

Please, support emergency shelters in Maine. They don't just provide shelter; they provide safety, they provide stability, and most importantly, they provide a path toward housing for families like mine, who might not otherwise have had a chance. Thank you for your time and consideration.